

# TALES OF THE LOST FRONTIER



# INTRODUCTION

The stories contained in this collection are stories of the North American frontier. Unlike most modern stories in this genre, however, they are not based on nostalgia or a study of history or tradition. Instead, they are based on the first-hand experiences of a person who spent many years seeking out the last remnants of that frontier.

All the familiar stories are here: a search for a lost mine, the history of a showdown and shootout, a humorous tale that Mark Twain might have written on an off day, a hunt for a last-of-the-western-outlaws type, and others. And they have been written in a way that is intended to show that, while the frontier tale is clearly on its deathbed, it is still capable of an occasional burst of life and vitality.

I hope you will enjoy reading the stories as much as I have enjoyed writing them.

G. Burton

## CONTENTS

<a href="#"><u>THE OLD MAN'S GOLD</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>2</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>THE SHOWDOWN</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>16</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>THE NO SEE</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>24</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>ME AND MY PARTNERS</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>32</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>A SPARK OF LIFE</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>39</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>INDIAN CABIN</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>46</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>THE LEGEND OF BILLY WALKER</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>53</u></a>

# THE OLD MAN'S GOLD

It was just after Tommy Charlie's grandfather died that I first heard about the gold. The old man's gold. That was the only thing anyone could talk about in Dawson City in those days. And of course the talk was fueled by Tommy himself, by the way he went so crazy.

He went on a binge like no one had ever seen before. He drank non-stop for days, buying drinks for anyone and everyone, and paying for all of it with gold nuggets. It was like he'd gone completely insane, totally out of control. And every time that some bartender was about to put some control on him and throw him out of the bar, he'd reach into his pocket and toss a few more nuggets onto the counter, and the bartender would back off and let him stay. His supply of nuggets seemed to be endless.

It was during his binge that I heard the stories about the old man's gold. And then when, after six days and nights of steady drinking without food or sleep and after just having spent his last nugget, Tommy suddenly fell dead on the floor of the Flora Dora. That was when I heard the stories about the curse.

The stories fascinated me. I couldn't get enough of them, and the more outrageous they were, the more I liked them. They sounded like something out of an old adventure book that I must have read when I was a kid. They sounded like old frontier legends come to life, made into flesh and blood by the fact that I knew Tommy and old Grandpa Charlie. They were totally fantastic, but at the same time they were real.

After I'd heard enough of them, I began trying to sort them out in my own mind, to separate the obviously made-up from the possibly true, and to try to put together a coherent story for myself to believe. It wasn't easy to do, but since there were a couple of things that I heard repeated over and over again and that sounded more-or-less credible, I finally managed to put together a background story that may be real and may not be.

It seems that Grandpa Charlie was about ten years old when the gold rush descended upon the Klondike and he saw his first white man. And it was a few years later, when the stampeders had left and only the dedicated gold-seekers remained, that he began hiring himself out as a guide to parties that wanted to prospect the outlying regions. According to virtually all the stories I heard, there was one particular group he guided that came to a tragic end. No one knows exactly what happened since Grandpa Charlie was the only survivor of the expedition and since he never told anyone what happened, not even his closest friends or his wife after he married.

There were accusations that Grandpa Charlie had murdered the men, but nothing could ever be proven. They'd disappeared without a trace, and even an Indian couldn't be arrested or convicted without at least some shred of evidence against him. Of course, nobody would ever hire him as a guide after that, but he didn't seem to mind. He made his living by hunting and by doing occasional odd jobs, and he married and raised a family and lived as a respected member of the tribe. The only strange thing was that every once in awhile, he'd disappear for a couple of weeks at a time and then reappear without any sort of explanation, even to his wife and kids.

And it's here that the gold comes into the story, because during all those later years, he always had gold nuggets available whenever he needed them, nuggets that came from who-knew-where. One thing about the nuggets, though, was that he never used them for himself. As far as anyone knew, he never used a single one for his own benefit, never used one to buy anything for himself. But whenever someone was sick or hurt or had some other serious problem, Grandpa Charlie would sell some of his nuggets and give the money to that person. And he'd give the person all of the money, not keeping a penny for himself.

It didn't take long for rumors of his gold to spread, and over the years there were a number of people who tried to follow him when they thought he was going to his mine, but all of them either returned empty handed or else they didn't return at all. More rumors spread about him killing the people he'd been unable to lose on his way to the mine, but then there were also supposed to be cases of people disappearing who'd waited until after he returned to town before setting out after the gold, so that he couldn't possibly have been the one who killed them.

It was shortly after Tommy died, when the stories were flying everywhere around Dawson City, that I ran into a couple of friends, Pete and Martin. We'd done a little prospecting along the Indian River the summer before—play prospecting as far as I was concerned, a simple excuse for going out into the bush. But evidently they had a pretty serious case of gold fever since they were back prospecting again this year, poking around somewhere a few miles down the Yukon River below the mouth of the Klondike. They'd come into town for a little R and R, and as soon as they'd started hearing the stories about the old man's gold, they'd immediately become hooked on the subject. They were like me, they couldn't get enough of the stories. They were even more so than me. They were obsessed.

The three of us made the rounds of Dawson's bars, drinking a lot and talking even more about the gold. Pete kept blurting out that we should go find the old man's gold, and the more he had to drink, the more often he said it. Martin was like an echo who repeated the sentiment each time Pete voiced it, and the louder that Pete said it, the louder Martin repeated it. So it was up to me to remind them of the reality of the situation, of the fact that we had no idea where the gold might be. We'd heard of just about as many different locations for the gold as we'd heard people talk about it, so we had no idea where to even start looking. We never considered the curse, though, as none of us took it seriously. Or at least I didn't take it seriously and they didn't seem to. No, our only problem was the practical one of not knowing where to look.

The way I saw it, the curse was probably nothing more than a bunch of exaggerations built up around one or two incidents where people got lost or suffered some normal type of wilderness accident and never made it back to town. And for all I knew, the people whose disappearances led to the stories may not even have been looking for the old man's gold at all. I was very skeptical about the curse, and whenever I said so, Pete and Martin agreed with me that it was bullshit.

We were in Diamond Tooth Gertie's, drunk and a bit disorderly, making the last stop on our tour of the town's bars, when we ran into Steve. Steve was a year-round resident of Dawson City, not a migratory type like the three of us, but we knew him from the year before when he'd spent a little time with us on the Indian River. He joined our group and started talking about the gold, and as it turned out, he had some real information to contribute. And I mean real

information. He said that he'd talked to old Peter Kelly a day or two earlier, old Peter the walking encyclopedia of information about gold mining in the Yukon Territory, and that Peter had told him a very interesting story about the gold. He'd told a story that could even have been true rather than being just another rumor.

According to Peter, there was a guy he knew many years earlier who came to him one day to say that he'd discovered where the old man's gold must be. The guy told Peter that he'd been floating down the Yukon River a few days earlier when he saw Grandpa Charlie pulling his canoe out of a hiding place near the mouth of a creek and carrying it down toward the river. And he also said that when Grandpa Charlie saw him, the Indian tried to hide again like he didn't want anyone to see this secret spot. The man tried to convince Peter to go along with him to look for the gold—it had to be somewhere up that creek—but Peter told him no, he wasn't interested. The man soon convinced a couple of other guys to go along with him, and the three of them set out after the gold never to be seen or heard from again.

The story sounded like so many of the others that we'd already heard, but one big difference was that in this case, Peter could actually name the people who'd gone after the gold. And another difference was that he could actually locate the creek where the gold was supposed to be, as in his efforts to convince Peter to come along, the man had told him which creek was Grandpa Charlie's creek.

Steve tried to find out which creek it was, but Peter refused to reveal the location since he claimed that each time he'd told someone in the past, that person had disappeared without a trace. Steve's curiosity was aroused, though, and finally after buying Peter enough beer and after convincing him that he had no intention of going after the gold himself, that he was just curious, Peter relented and told him where the creek was. Steve was probably telling the truth when he said he wouldn't go out after the gold, but when he ran into the three of us, he couldn't resist the temptation to pass the information on.

We all sat in stunned silence for several minutes after he'd finished his story and revealed the location of the creek. None of us knew exactly how to react as we let it penetrate our drunken brains that now we had the information we needed to actually go out in search of the gold rather than simply talk about it. And on top of that, the creek wasn't very far away, only about five miles downriver from where Pete and Martin were prospecting already. So we knew where the creek was, and from everything we'd heard about the old man being gone for a couple of weeks at a time when he went for the gold, we knew that it must be a few days' hike up that creek. But for the time being, we just sat in silence and let the information sink in.

Then suddenly Pete jumped to his feet and yelled, "Let's go!" and no sooner had he said it than Martin was on his feet yelling the same thing. "Let's go, man! Let's go get that gold." Steve and I hesitated momentarily, but then the enthusiasm of the moment got to me and I found myself standing and yelling it, too. "Let's go!" I looked over at Steve and saw that he'd already committed himself to the enterprise even before me. He was standing and yelling with the rest of us. And so before any of us really knew what was happening, we were all on our feet and heading for the door, yelling and slapping each other on the backs as we staggered out of Gertie's and down the street toward Pete and Martin's canoe.

We were almost there when Steve said, “Hey, I’ve gotta go by my place and get my gear,” and so we turned and headed for his cabin. He started rummaging around saying he needed this and that and the other, but Pete kept telling him not to worry about it, they had plenty of gear at their camp. All he needed was his rifle and his sleeping bag. They already had everything else.

It wasn’t long before the four of us reached the big cargo canoe and set out, first for the campground across the river to pick up my gear and then down the river to Pete and Martin’s campsite. We were back in high spirits as we floated down the river in the long, extended twilight that passes for a Yukon summer night, and our shouting and off-key singing briefly disturbed the huge silence of the northern wilderness as we went.

We built a campfire and sat around it trying to locate Grandpa Charlie’s creek on Pete’s map and making plans for the trip, and of course, we also made plans for how to spend all the gold we were sure we’d find. We were so euphoric and so optimistic about our prospects that we just let our fancies run wild that night. We saw ourselves as millionaires with beautiful women draped all over us—even homely Martin would get all the women he wanted once he struck it rich—and we saw ourselves living in exotic places and owning everything we’d ever wanted to own. We went on and on that way until we gradually began to come down from our high and drift off one by one to get some sleep. I rolled my sleeping bag out in an open spot and laid a poncho nearby so I could pull it over me if it should rain during the night, and I soon fell asleep.

I awoke a few hours later with less of a hangover than I had any right to expect, got up and rekindled the fire and brewed some hobo coffee, and then I waited for the others to join me. Martin was the first to get up, followed shortly by Steve, and the three of us sat around the fire drinking coffee and discussing the trip in more calm, realistic terms than we had the night before as we waited for Pete to join us. But we didn’t see any type of movement inside Pete’s tent, so after awhile Martin went to the food cache, came back and started cooking breakfast. We called Pete when breakfast was ready, but all we got for a reply was a mumbled, “Go away.” We reminded Pete that he was the one who’d insisted the night before that we get an early start today, but his only answer was another “Go away.”

We ate breakfast and packed up gear and loaded it into the canoe, and we were just about to issue an ultimatum to Pete—get up now or we leave without you—when he finally stumbled out of his tent looking even more like a rumpled old grizzly bear than he usually did. We said let’s go, everything was ready except for his tent, but he said he couldn’t leave on an empty stomach and so he began the long, slow process of cooking up some of his famous pancakes.

There’s always a temptation with someone named Pete to call him Klondike Pete, and we often did so, but these pancakes of his had earned him another nickname that we used even more often: Peter Pancake. He could spend hours cooking up a batch of them, throwing in a bit of everything he could find around camp from spam to beans to dried fruit to leftovers from supper, and the only reason he could call them pancakes was because he used pancake batter to hold the whole thing together when he cooked it.

Pete cooked up two of these monstrosities and then proceeded to eat them while the rest of us waited, feeling both impatient and a bit queasy because of our hangovers from the night

before and because of the sight and smell and sheer size of the breakfast that Pete was putting away. If we'd never seen him eat before, we'd never have believed that one person could eat so much. But our previous experience had already taught us that he needed huge amounts of food to keep that big body of his going, so we weren't particularly surprised when he finished both pancakes. Now he said he was ready to go and so, after packing up Pete's tent and the rest of the loose gear around camp, we finally got into our slightly overloaded canoe and headed down river with almost half the day already shot.

It's often hard to judge distances while floating down a river, and so when we came across a creek after going some distance, we found that we had divided opinions as to whether or not this was the creek we wanted. We landed and pulled out the map and looked around and argued among ourselves about where we were. And it wasn't until after I'd pointed out that there were no islands near the mouth of this creek as there should be according to the map, that we all agreed our creek had to be somewhere else further downriver.

The next creek we came across was the one, and we knew it as soon as we saw it. There were the islands nearby, there was the bend in the river a little below it. This was the creek we were looking for. This was Grandpa Charlie's creek. Pete and I paddled for all we were worth, and we soon landed at a little beach just below the mouth of the creek.

We immediately began to explore, and it wasn't long before Steve called us to, "Come over here and look at this." The spot he pointed to was a small gully where the vegetation had apparently been disturbed some years earlier. It showed the signs of some large object having once been there, and we all looked at each other and said almost in unison, "Grandpa Charlie's canoe." This was the spot where he'd hidden his canoe. We knew it had to be. And that meant the story was true; old Peter's story was true. Grandpa Charlie had come to this creek and he'd hidden his canoe in this spot, and so the gold must be here, somewhere up this creek.

We knew that our next task was to find the trail the old man had used, and so we fanned out to look for it. Pete found a game trail leading up the opposite bank of the creek, up toward the ridges above, and he called for us to follow him. He'd found it. We gathered at the trailhead and Pete began jogging up the trail without even going back to get his gear when Steve and I both yelled at him to wait. We needed our gear and, besides, there might be another trail around here. We shouldn't start until we were sure that this is the right one. Pete said he was already sure, but he was out-voted three to one, so we fanned out once again. We searched everywhere, even sending people to follow the game trails leading in both directions along the banks of the river, but wherever we looked, we couldn't find any other trails leading inland. So now we were sure. We grabbed our gear out of the canoe, hid the empty canoe in the old man's hiding place, cached the gear we didn't need in a nearby tree, and then we headed for the trail figuring we still had time to make a few miles' progress that day. And in any case, we could at least get to some higher country where the mosquitoes wouldn't be as bad as they were along the river.

Pete led the way, of course, and he set a blistering pace in spite of the huge pack he carried. In his pack he brought along not only his big tent and a shovel and a couple of gold pans and all sorts of camping equipment, but also the makings of two or three weeks' worth of his infamous pancakes. The weight didn't seem to bother him at all, though. And with the big pack

and the gear tied all over it and the rifle in his hand, and also with his grizzly bear build and his unkempt curly hair and his dark beard, he looked every bit the way a Klondike Pete should look.

Martin followed behind Pete, and he presented a picture that was almost the complete opposite. He looked more like a refugee from a Salvation Army than he did a prospector. He had long straggly brown hair and an unwashed, unshaven, uncombed look, and he always dressed in worn-out, dirty old city clothes. If it hadn't been for his cheap hiking boots, he would have looked exactly like someone you'd see hanging out on a Toronto street corner panhandling. But his skinny, sickly appearance was deceptive as he carried a good size load himself and still managed to match Pete stride for stride.

Steve came third, carrying a lighter load than any of the rest of us and still having trouble keeping up. To look at him, you'd think that you were seeing an advertisement for the Master Race what with his muscular build and his blonde good looks, but it seems that there was something missing in his character. He somehow lacked the toughness and masculinity that Yukon culture demands of a man. By local standards, he was considered a wimp. And as our hike went on, he showed us why he had that reputation as he lagged farther and farther behind until I was forced to pass him to keep from losing contact with Pete and Martin altogether.

We followed the trail as it wound its way through the scrubby forest, leaving the creek and slowly climbing the ridge. And then after having gone a few miles, we came out onto a bluff overlooking the creek. The hike had been easy so far, but as we looked ahead, we could see a spot where the bush became so thick that the trail completely disappeared, and it looked like that thick bush continued for quite some distance. We knew we'd have to fight our way through it and then find the trail again on the other side and so, with twilight beginning to gather, we decided to camp here and continue on in the morning.

We lit a fire and ate supper, and then we sat around talking about gold and how to find it and how to spend it, and also the trip ahead when suddenly there came a loud pop from the fire followed shortly by another one. Pete, Martin and I jumped to our feet in surprise only to see Steve standing just behind us and laughing away. That's when we remembered about his sense of humor, which we'd experienced the year before. He loved to throw bullets into the fire and then laugh at our startled reactions, and it didn't matter how many times we told him it was dangerous, he still found it way too hilarious not to do it again whenever he thought we weren't expecting it. He threw one more bullet into the fire later on that evening, and even though we made threats about what would happen to him if he didn't stop, we all knew he'd do it again another day.

The next morning, Pete got up along with the rest of us—no more sleeping in for him now as he was on the scent of gold—and so we made a fairly early start of it. We pushed and pulled our way through the thick bush and then continued up the trail, stopping to refill our canteens at a small creek we passed along the way. We came to another patch of thick bush, this one even bigger than the last, and after stopping for a moment to look around, we shrugged our shoulders and plunged into it. No way around it. Nothing to do but fight our way through. When Pete and Martin and I regained the trail on the other side of the bush, we looked back to see where Steve was. And when we did so, we saw his head bobbing along somewhere only about halfway across the big patch of chest-high bush, and it looked like he was making slow progress



through it. We yelled at him to hurry up and Pete said we should just leave him, let him catch up later, but the other two of us talked him out of it.

We started up the trail again after Steve had caught up, and we didn't come to any more big patches of bush as the trail soon began to climb. Pete powered his way up the long slope and Martin followed right behind, matching him step for step, while I did my best to keep up with them, only lagging slightly behind. But once again it was Steve who couldn't keep up. Each time we stopped to wait, it took him longer to catch up. Pete kept saying we should leave him, and one time he had to be physically restrained by Martin in order to make him wait.

We finally reached the top of the slope and found that the game trail now led us along the crest of a ridge. The walking was easy here as it was fairly flat and the trees were well separated with lots of open space between them and as the trail was well defined. We followed the ridge for a couple of miles and then began to descend while still going more or less parallel to the creek. At the bottom of the long descent, we came upon a place where the trail crossed a small creek that flowed toward the bigger one down below. It was at this crossing that we found ourselves confronted with the first fork in the trail we'd seen so far, but it was also here that we found the first clear signs of humans having once been here before. We found the remains of an old campsite.

We could see where someone had built a campfire along the banks of this small creek many years before, and we could also see where they'd tossed out some empty tin cans. We all looked at each other and, without having to say a word, we knew that we were thinking the same thing: we're on the right trail. Somebody camped here a long time ago, somebody who was after the gold.

We were starting to feel the strain of our long day's hike, and so we decided that maybe we should camp here ourselves. It was a good site and it had water. It wouldn't be a dry camp like the previous night. Only Pete had very much energy left, and he told us that while we made camp, he'd explore one of the forks in the trail. He took the fork that led off down our little creek, and it wasn't until an hour or two later that he returned to tell us that it was a dead-end. It ended at a pool in the big creek and he hadn't been able to find where the trail continued anywhere either along the creek or across it. He said that the pool was full of graylings, but rather than catching some fish for supper while he was there, he'd chosen to wash out a few pans of dirt instead, a few pans that yielded nothing, not even a color. None of the rest of us had enough energy to hike down to the pool right then, so for supper we had nothing but the beans we'd prepared while Pete was gone, no fresh fish to accompany them.

That evening in camp, we were very quiet. There was little talking and no joking. Even Steve didn't throw a single bullet into the campfire all evening. Maybe it was because we were tired from the day's hike, but in my own case, I know that there was also something else involved, a feeling I had, a feeling of uneasiness.

I don't know how to describe the feeling I had at the time, though now based on hindsight and on the events which were to follow, I could say that it was a feeling like we were disturbing something, something big and strong and dangerous. It was like we were awakening some powerful force—not an evil force, mind you, but an angry force, a huge force that was growing

increasingly angry with us as we traveled along. At least that's how the feeling seems now when I think back about it, though at the time I was probably only aware of having a gnawing, uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. A feeling that had begun as something vague and distant during the day's hike but had become quite noticeable as I sat around the camp. I didn't know if anyone else had the same feeling as me since I never said a word to any of the other guys about it, and since none of them ever spoke up about it either. All I know is that everyone was very restrained that evening; everyone was quiet and pensive.

The next morning, we followed the trail to the top of a rise where we got a good look at the country that lay ahead. We saw that the little valley formed by our creek soon began to get narrower and the sides of the valley got steeper, and we also saw that there were no more ridges ahead, no more high ground and no more easy walking. As we continued on our way, the trail angled down toward the creek, and by the time we reached the lower ground near the creek, the condition of the trail had begun to deteriorate. The scrubby spruce trees grew very close together here, and the trail wound its way between them wherever it could. Our progress became slower as we were forced to follow the zigzags and ups-and-downs of the path, and as we repeatedly stepped over the dead trees that had fallen across the trail.

We'd gone a couple of miles through this thick forest when Pete, who was walking in the lead like always, stopped and said, "Hey, look at this." I was only a short distance behind, and I soon caught up with him and caught sight of what he was talking about. There in a small clearing were scattered pieces of old camping equipment: scraps of canvas, an old blanket, a frying pan, pieces of rope, what might have been a tent-pole. Pete and Martin and I examined it while we waited for Steve to catch up with us, and it was Martin who pronounced the conclusion that all of us quickly agreed upon. "Looks like somebody lightened their load here." Somebody lightened their load and then never returned for the abandoned gear. Obviously.

After a rest, we continued on until, a mile or two further along, we found an old shovel and then, a short distance beyond that, more abandoned gear: an axe, a gold pan. We stopped to look at it, but none of us repeated Martin's earlier conclusion. This wasn't the type of gear that someone out prospecting would leave behind to lighten his load. There had to be some other explanation for it.

The uneasy feeling in my stomach was now becoming much stronger. There was something wrong here, I was sure of it. But in spite of what I was feeling, I didn't say anything to the other guys. In fact, nobody said a word. We just stared at the gear for a few minutes and then continued on our way.

Then, after going about another half mile up the trail, we came across an even more disturbing discovery, one that sent my feeling of uneasiness into high gear. Because what we found were scraps of clothing and part of an old boot that had been chewed on by animals, and off to one side was a rusty old rifle and the remains of a hat. We knew it as soon as we saw it: somebody died in this spot. We all looked at the evidence in silence for a long time, and as we looked we even spotted what could have been a bone off in the bushes, but none of us cared to go over and examine it more carefully to see if it really was a bone and whether or not it was a human one. No, we just looked and said nothing until Steve finally broke the tension by saying,

“We should take that rifle with us on the way back.” Yeah, right. We’ll take it with us. But for now, let’s get going.

That evening at camp, there was a lot of tension in the air. All of us seemed to feel very uncomfortable and nervous, but we also seemed to agree that the best way to deal with our nervousness was to tell stories and make jokes. Like if we could just start acting the way we had at the beginning of the trip, we could somehow recover the happy carelessness we’d felt at that time. Our strategy didn’t work, though, as our attempts at humor fell flat and as, in my case at least, they actually made it worse by making me even more painfully aware of just how much things had changed in the last couple of days.

Then suddenly there came a loud pop from the campfire—Steve and his bullets again—and when the three of us jumped up to yell at him, we were surprised to see that instead of standing there laughing at us, he was lying on his back on the ground. We looked at him where he’d fallen, and now the feeling of horror I’d been fighting back came flooding over me with all its force. His right eye was a mass of blood and gore where the bullet had struck him, and though we made what efforts we could to revive him, we knew from the first moment we saw him that he was already dead. The bullet had entered through his eye and gone directly into his brain. He was probably dead before he even hit the ground.

After a time, we called off our resuscitation efforts and then stood or knelt around staring at Steve until Pete eventually went over and got an old shirt and threw it over his face. And at that signal, the three of us returned to the campfire and sat there in silence.

It was Pete who finally broke the silence, “We told him it was dangerous. We told him not to do it.” Martin took the cue from Pete and ran with it, “It was his own fault. He shoulda known better. We always told him.” Pete, “It was an accident waiting to happen.” Martin, “It was bound to happen, and it coulda happened to one of us. Just think of that. It coulda been one of us laying there dead.” Pete, “We always told him not to....”

The two of them fed off each other like that for some time, blaming poor Steve for his own death, but I didn’t join them as I was more interested in another question besides that of blame. And as soon as an opportunity presented itself, I inserted my concern into the conversation. “So what do we do now?... With Steve, I mean.” As neither of them responded right away, I continued, “I mean, we’ve gotta take his body to town.” Pete answered like I’d just spoken to him in some unintelligible language, “Take his body? Now?” Me, “Yeah, of course.” Pete, “We can’t go back now. What are you talking about? We can’t go back after we came all this way.” Martin, “And we’re so close to the gold.” Pete, “Yeah, we can’t take him back now.... And what good would it do him anyway? He’s already dead.” Martin, “That’s right. It won’t do him any good now.” Pete, “After we get the gold, we can take his body back. We’ll take him back with us when we go.” Martin, “Yeah, on the way back. That’s when we’ll take him.”

I was clearly out-voted and so I made no effort to argue with them. They were going to continue on and that was that. I saw that it was useless to try to change their minds, and I also saw for the first time just how different our attitudes were about this expedition of ours. To me, the whole thing was basically a lark, a chance to live out one of my childhood fantasies by tramping off into the wilderness to seek out adventure and maybe a little gold. And now that the

lark had gone bad and Steve was dead, I was ready to turn back and forget about the whole thing. But Pete and Martin saw things in a completely different way. They were obsessed with the gold. They took the whole thing very seriously, and I could see now that they'd actually believed all those things we'd said at the beginning of the trip about getting rich and living the life we'd dreamed of living and all the rest of it. I mean, I'd said those things too, but I'd always had a sense of irony about it. The very idea of a group of guys striking it rich in the wilderness in the 1970's! I'd made those statements along with the rest of them, sure, but I'd always seen it as part of the fantasy we were creating and acting out. Not Pete and Martin, though. They had no sense of irony. They'd been serious when they'd said it.

So the decision was made to cache Steve's body in a tree where animals couldn't get at it and to pick it up on the way back. We tossed a rope over a branch and tied it to Steve's ankles and hoisted him up well above the ground, and then we left him there during our short, troubled night's sleep. And he was still hanging there when we went on our way up the trail the next morning.

The trail was difficult, and it seemed to get more difficult with almost every step, but we made good time through the thick forest anyway thanks to the fact that we no longer had to stop frequently and wait for Steve to catch up. I hated to think ill of the dead, but it was obvious that Steve had been a burden while he'd been with us and that now we were making better time without him.

We went on for half a day, over half a day, when Pete suddenly yelled out, "Hey, look at this." I hurried to catch up with him and, as I did so, I must have taken my eyes off of where I was going. Because when I stepped from one fallen tree trunk that lay across our path to another, I could swear that the second one moved just as my foot approached it. But whatever may have happened, the result was that I fell onto the second trunk, hitting it first with my right shin and knee, and then with my side. I looked up to see if Pete and Martin had heard the cry I gave when I fell, but I saw that they were so intent on what was before them that they hadn't heard a thing. So rather than yelling again, I got up and limped over to them, my leg hurting so much that I could barely put any weight on it at all.

When I got up to where they were, I saw what they were looking at so intently: the remains of yet another gold-seeker. And in this case, the evidence was beyond a doubt as, in addition to the remains of a full set of camping gear, there were also several bones scattered around and, off to the side of the small clearing, there was even a human skull. The sight of this should have filled me with dread even more than our earlier discoveries had, but in this case, I was in too much pain from my fall to feel anything beyond that. I finally called out to the others, "Hey, guys, I think I'm hurt," and they came over to see what was wrong.

After a brief examination, it was clear that I couldn't continue on with my leg the way it was. The only thing to do was for me to stay here, in this spot where this other poor guy died, and wait for them to come back. I'd just have to keep company with the dead guy until my leg was well enough for me to make the trip back down to the river. Pete offered to leave me his big tent—he was probably tired of carrying it in this difficult terrain anyway—and so he and Martin cleared a spot of all the old gear that was lying about and erected the tent right where the other guy's tent had once stood. Then we opened up our packs and divided up the remaining rations.

After setting up the tent and before doing the rations, Pete came over to me, and I took the opportunity to say to him, “You know, Pete, you don’t have to keep going.”

Pete just laughed at me, “What’s that, Greywolf? Are you looking for another excuse for us to turn back?”

But I was serious. I knew this could be our last chance to save ourselves. “No, really, I mean it. We could go back now and everything would be okay.”

Pete didn’t want to hear what I was saying, though. “Everything’ll be okay when we go back with the gold. That’s when everything’ll be okay.”

“No, Pete, there’s something bad going on here. We’re in danger, all of us. I can feel it. I can feel the danger.”

“Ah, bullshit. That’s not danger you feel. It’s opportunity. It’s gold! Because I feel it, too, and that’s what I feel is gold. Why, it’s so close now, I can even smell it.”

I didn’t try to argue with him any more. There was no use in it. After dividing the rations, Martin came over to say goodbye before they left, and I took the opportunity to try to persuade him. “You know you don’t have to keep going. We could turn back now and still come out of this thing okay.”

“What are you talking about? That curse or something?” Martin asked.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. We’re way too tough to die out here. We’re tougher than some old curse.” What he said and the way he said it sounded so comical coming from a walking scarecrow like him, but I was in no mood to laugh at him.

I finally just shook both their hands and said, “Good luck,” and watched as the two of them started to walk up the trail, the trail that would lead toward their deaths. I was so sure of that. I was so sure they’d never come back. But there was nothing I could do about it. Just before they disappeared from sight, I yelled out to them, “I’m not gonna wait here forever for you guys. If you’re not back by the time my knee gets better, I’m going back without you.” They turned to look at me one last time, and then they waved and continued on their way.

I had nothing to do in my lonely camp all day but rest my leg and let it heal. I only stirred when I needed wood for the fire that I kept burning all day long in an effort to keep the mosquitoes away or when I needed to get something to eat. But mostly I just sat. Sat and thought.

I thought about death and I thought about dying and I thought about the fact that my bones would soon be joining those of that other guy who died in this spot. My eyes were constantly drawn to him, to his skull, and though I tried to force myself to look at other things and to think other thoughts, my attention kept focusing in more and more on the skull. And finally, I began to talk to it, to talk aloud like a crazy man.

I tried to explain my motives to it. I tried to explain what I was doing here. I tried to explain that I really wasn't interested in the gold, that I'd just come along for the trip; for fun and adventure and for something to do. The gold didn't mean a thing to me. I don't know if the skull heard me or not, but the more I talked, the better I felt. That awful feeling of dread that had been growing in me for days now began to recede for the first time. So I continued to talk, and I continued to feel better.

I promised the skull that I'd never touch the gold, I wouldn't even look at it, and I'd never tell anyone where the gold was. I'd never say a word to anyone. Nothing. And as I made and repeated the promises, little by little I began to feel at peace.

I'm not sure exactly how many days I was in that camp, but just as my leg was feeling better and as my food supply was getting low enough to where I knew I'd have to be setting out for the river soon, Pete suddenly staggered into camp. He looked terrible in his filthy clothes and with blood caked on his face and in his beard and with blood-stains on his shirt and without any sort of equipment besides his rifle which was so badly bent that it served as nothing but a walking stick. He looked like death. He looked like a dead man, and the only thing that seemed to keep him going was his willpower as he staggered over and flopped down beside the fire.

I should have been shocked or repelled at his appearance, but I wasn't. In the last few days, I'd grown so accustomed to death that he looked somehow normal to me. He looked the way people are supposed to look when they're dead.

After he sat down by the fire, Pete said, "Look at this," and he reached into his shirt and pulled out the big leather bag that hung around his neck. We'd always made fun of him about the bag because it was so big—it was probably big enough to hold five or ten pounds of gold—but he was an optimist and he always believed that someday soon he'd fill the whole thing with gold. Now as I looked at it, I saw that he really had managed to fill it. He opened the bag and pulled out several gold nuggets and held them out to me, but I wouldn't take them. I even averted my eyes as I thought about the promises I'd made to the skull, and I didn't look back again until after I heard him fall over.

When I looked back, I saw him lying on his back and painfully struggling for breath, so I got up and limped over to help him, grabbing my sleeping bag and some small logs and using them to prop him up into a sitting position where he could breathe more easily. I offered him some water, but when he drank it, he immediately threw it back up along with a large quantity of blood. It was clear that there was nothing I could do for him now except offer him a little comfort as he died. And maybe I could talk to him, too. Maybe I could find out what had happened. "Where's Martin?"

"Dead."

"How'd it happen?"

"At the gold. He fell."

I pumped Pete for information. I just had to know. I could see how much it hurt him to talk, but I could also see that he wanted to tell me his story just as much as I wanted to hear it.

He struggled and spoke and told me what happened to the two of them after we separated, and though I wanted more details than he gave me, I just didn't have the heart to ask him to say any more than he did.

He told me that there were more accidents after they left me. For instance, the first night in camp, the rope they'd used to cache their food supply in a tree outside camp somehow broke during the night and a bear or some other animal got into their food and ruined almost all of it. They never heard a thing when it was happening and in the morning, they only managed to salvage a little bit of their food. And then there was another time when a tree suddenly started to fall for no good reason, and the two of them just got out of the way in time.

They also found more human remains as they went, but they didn't let the accidents or the dead people stop them. They just kept right on going like nothing had happened; they kept right on after the gold.

They finally came to a place where the trail ran along a high bank above the creek, and Pete said that as soon as they reached the place, they knew that this was it. They got to the edge of the bank and looked down, and there they saw it. The creek down below was full of gold where it flowed through this small canyon. There was so much that the entire bed seemed to be colored gold. This had to be the richest creek anyone had ever discovered, anywhere, anytime. They began to run along the bank toward a spot far ahead where they could get down to the creek, and once Pete had descended, he began running back downstream toward the golden spot they'd seen.

From the few details Pete gave me, I'm not sure what was the first thing he saw when he got there, whether it was the gold or whether it was Martin lying dead where he'd fallen off the high bank. But in any case, Pete reacted to both things while he was there. He picked up nuggets and looked at them and shouted in triumph, and he also checked on his friend to see if there was anything he could do to help him. I just don't know which of the two he did first.

When Pete checked on Martin, he saw that it was too late. Martin was already dead. But he made a promise to his friend that he wouldn't leave his body out there for the animals to eat. He'd carry Martin back with him even though the trail was so rugged and even though he had no food left to maintain his strength on the way back, but he'd do it anyway. He felt he owed him that much.

He pulled out his big leather bag and began filling it with the nuggets that were laying everywhere in the creek, but before he'd gotten it half full, he heard a rumbling sound and looked up to see a big rock falling at him from the bank on the opposite side of the creek. He jumped out of the way in time and then went right back to picking up nuggets when he heard another rock coming at him, and he jumped clear of that one, too. He went back to filling his bag and, just after he finished and as he was hanging the bag around his neck, there came a third rock, one that he didn't hear in time to be able to get out of the way.

The rock bounced off the side of the bank and hit him square in the chest just as he turned to see it coming, and when he fell, it pinned him to the ground in the middle of the creek where he had to struggle to keep his head above water. He used his great strength to push the rock off

him, and then he stood up and shouted his defiance at the sky and the earth and everything else, “I beat you, goddamn it! You can’t kill me! I won!!” And just after he yelled it, he vomited blood.

With the injuries he’d just suffered, Pete had to break his promise to Martin and leave him behind. In fact, he left everything behind except his bag of gold and his rifle, which he took along in spite of its being bent from having been hit by one of the rocks. He just grabbed it and started walking, and he kept walking and walking. That was all he could tell me about the trip back to my camp, that it had been one long haze of pain and suffering.

Pete finished his story and then he never spoke again. After a few minutes of silence, he pulled out his bag of gold and poured some of the nuggets into his hand and then he played with them, pouring them from one hand into the other, back and forth. He’d done this a few times when he suddenly took a deep breath. He struggled to take another breath and then another one, each one deeper than the one before, and then he let all the air out of his lungs and his head fell backwards. Dead.

Once again I was alone, and once again peace returned to that spot in the woods. All was now as it should be. I looked over at the skull as though asking it what to do now, and I soon had my answer. I took the bag of gold from around Pete’s neck and gathered up all the nuggets that he’d spilled, and then I began limping toward the creek. I followed the small creek I’d been camping beside as it flowed downhill, fighting my way through the thick forest without any sort of trail to guide me through the tightly packed trees, and I finally arrived at the main creek. I looked around for the deepest pool in the creek that I could find, and it’s there that I threw the bag of gold.

Back in camp, I dragged Pete’s body into his tent and laid his broken rifle across his chest. I looked down at him for awhile and felt that this was appropriate. This was the way Klondike Pete should be buried, so I said softly, “Goodbye, friend,” and went out. I packed my gear and started to leave, but before I went, I turned to the skull one last time and told it, “You take good care of Pete, okay? He’s really not such a bad guy. And Martin and Steve, too. You take care of all of them for me.”

I hardly stopped on the way back to the river. I pushed myself to get away from that place of death. I passed Steve’s body still hanging by the ankles where we’d left it, but I didn’t want to deal with any more death now, so I didn’t even stop as I passed it. I just said goodbye to him and kept going. When I reached the river, I got into the canoe and started the long, hard trip upriver back to town. Eventually, I abandoned the canoe below Moosehide and entered Dawson City on foot, going straight to the bus station and taking the first bus out of town, never to return.

I promised the skull not to tell anything about the gold to anyone, and I kept my promise. I never talked about it; not even a word. Or at least up until now. And I wouldn’t have written this story I just wrote, either, if it wasn’t for the fact that I’m dying of cancer. But since I’ll be dead soon, I don’t see what harm it could do. And besides, I’ve always wanted to set things straight, especially for the people who knew Pete or Martin or Steve. You must have been wondering all these years why they disappeared and what ever happened to them. Well, now I’ve written it and now you've read it. Now you know.



## THE SHOWDOWN

Mark didn't like Californians, and he especially didn't like this particular Californian, and he even more especially didn't like seeing him here, in this particular bar. But there the guy was, sitting at the bar—sitting there like he owned the place—and the sight of him offended Mark deeply. Didn't the guy know that this was Mark's bar? Did he think he could just come in here whenever he wanted, without even asking permission? Who the hell did he think he was?

Mark—the other Mark—saw Mark and his friends walk into the bar, but he did his best to ignore them. He was just sitting here, drinking a few beers and minding his own business. He wasn't looking for trouble with anybody, and he especially wasn't looking to renew that old trouble with Mark. As far as he was concerned, it was over. Dead and buried.

Mark—the first Mark—felt the old anger returning as he looked at the guy. Sitting there. Sitting there in Mark's bar. Can you imagine that? Just because Mark and his friends didn't get out on the town as much as they used to didn't mean that it wasn't still their bar. It was! It was their bar, and no goddamned Californian had any right to drink here if they didn't want him to.

The other Mark noticed the way Mark was looking at him and saying things to his friends, and he didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit. He knew that it meant trouble, and he also knew that he was in no position to prevent the trouble. It was too late for him to leave now, and there was nothing he could say to them that would help. He'd just have to sit here and play it cool and wait. And as he waited, he wondered what the hell was wrong with this guy anyway. Why did he want to dredge up old fights that had never even been between the two of them in the first place. The fight had been between that Mark and Greywolf, and it had ended the day when Greywolf left town. Mark himself had never been involved in it directly.

The first Mark couldn't take his eyes off Mark, sitting there at the bar, and the more he stared at him, the more he was reminded of Greywolf. That asshole! That complete asshole!! That asshole who tried to steal his girl. And this guy sitting here was Greywolf's best friend, or at least he was his best friend here in Coos Bay, which was enough for Mark. He hated the guy the same way he hated Greywolf. He hated him even more than he hated every other Californian he'd ever met.

The other Mark was waiting for the guy to make his move. He was tensed up and ready to defend himself, though he was doing his best not to show it. He was trying to maintain an outward calm. But fight he would if that was what it came to, and he swore that no matter what happened, he wouldn't let himself be run out of town the way Greywolf had been. Sea-going jobs were tight on the west coast, and he needed his job on the tugs. He wasn't footloose the way Greywolf was, and he wasn't about to pull out of town and head for Alaska or the Gulf or wherever. No, as long as he had his job in Coos Bay, he was staying right here.

The first Mark stared at this goddamned Californian who'd come up north here for no other reason than to steal something, to steal whatever he could get. Jobs, women, you name it. And to top it all off, this guy had even had the gall to steal his name, his very own name. Can you get over that? It was about time that one of these Californians learned a lesson, and Mark

was just the guy to teach it to him. Goddamned California faggots coming up here and messing with us real men, us Oregon men. He'd teach this wimp a lesson.

The other Mark saw Mark moving closer, and he knew that the moment had come. But he was ready for him, ready to fight him and ready to teach him a lesson. He'd teach this candy-ass townie not to mess with a real man like him. He'd teach him not to mess with a rough, tough seaman, that's what he'd teach him. He'd teach this wimp a lesson.

Sean and Dave hung back as their friend Mark attacked, lunging forward with his right fist flying toward Mark's temple. Mark turned out of the way of the punch in time and countered it by swinging a beer bottle at Mark's head. But his arm got tangled up with Mark's left, so he only struck a glancing blow which landed at the same time as Mark glanced a left fist off his cheek. Mark's momentum carried him forward until the two of them came crashing down onto the floor together, and there they wrestled around and threw punches at each other.

The bartender yelled at them to stop and to take it outside, and it wasn't long before he and some of the patrons had pulled the two of them apart. "You two want to fight, you do it outside. You don't do it in this bar. You got me?"

The other Mark was about to complain that he'd been sitting there minding his own business when this other guy had started it all, but seeing that he was already being pushed toward the door, he knew it would be a waste of breath. He felt the adrenalin pumping through him, but at the same time, he felt like he'd already had enough fighting for one night. As he was being pushed out the door, he looked longingly back at his barstool.

The first Mark felt calmer now, too. He felt like the worst of his anger had already been appeased, and as he was being hustled toward the door, he went willingly but with no real desire to continue fighting. But he had a front to maintain, though. People he knew were watching. So as he went, he threw a number of menacing glances over toward Mark. And as soon as they were out on the sidewalk, half surrounded by people from the bar who had come out to watch the fight, he began making threats. "You asshole! You get the fuck outa this town before I kill ya. And I mean it! Next time I see you, I'll have a gun with me."

"You don't scare me, you piece of shit. *You* get out of town!"

"I mean it. I'll shoot your ass. I know this town a lot better than you do. I'll kill you. I'll pick you off."

"Yeah, I'm shakin'. I'm really scared."

"I'm not kiddin'. You better run like your buddy Greywolf did, or you'll be sorry."

"Hey, speakin' of Greywolf. You know he told me your old lady was real sweet. Best piece of ass he had in a long time. Maybe I'll get some too after I whip your sorry ass."

This last statement infuriated Mark, but he still lacked the will to resume fighting, so he just repeated his earlier threats. He repeated them a number of times, each time trying to use a more forceful voice and also using more I-mean-its and more profanity with each repetition. The

other Mark stood his ground verbally, though, and the sparring went on for some time until finally the crowd of spectators, seeing that there would be no more entertainment for them that night, began to drift away. Eventually finding themselves alone except for a few of the hardcore, the two Marks hurled a few final insults at each other and then walked away, each going off in a different direction.

The first Mark felt triumphant as he walked down the street, though he retained enough doubts that he felt the need to seek confirmation from Sean and Dave. “I kicked ass, didn’t I? I showed him. He’ll be gone from this town by sunrise. He’ll split faster than Greywolf did, won’t he? I sure showed him.”

He looked at Sean and Dave and saw them agreeing with him, but somehow their agreement seemed to lack any sort of real enthusiasm. And seeing this, it wasn’t long before his doubts began to creep back in. They crept in until, finally, he was forced to admit them to himself: no, he hadn’t really shown the guy very much at all, and there wasn’t much chance that the events of that evening would actually run him out of town. This guy was going to need more of a scare than that to get rid of him. He was gonna need more persuading, more threats, more something. This thing wasn’t over yet; it wasn’t over by a long shot.

The other Mark was in a post-adrenalin high as he walked up the street, and his mind was working in extra-high gear. He was imagining all sorts of scenarios about what would happen next, about how he and Mark would face off the next time they ran into each other. And he tried to work out each of his scenarios in such a way that he’d be able to come out on top in those future confrontations.

He knew, though, that the one thing he’d lacked the most in the confrontation they’d just had had been backup—he’d been all alone in that bar while the other guy had been with friends—and so he decided to go right out and put together a posse. He went down a mental list of his friends and, as he did so, he realized that all of them were out on tugs at the time. But then he suddenly remembered that there was a new guy in town: Jerry. Jerry the new guy, he was in town. So Jerry it would be; Jerry would be his posse. He’d go right over and see Jerry.

When Mark got to the apartment, Jerry was already in bed, but as soon as he saw the signs that the fight had left on Mark’s face, he was glad to let him in and listen to the story of the evening’s events. He nodded in agreement about what assholes these townies were, even though he’d never actually met any of them, and he agreed that the fight wasn’t over yet; it wasn’t over by a long shot. But when he was asked for advice, the only thing he could think of to say was that they should get more people on their side. More people, that was what they needed. But who could they get?

“How about Big John?” Mark suddenly said as he remembered that John’s tug was due back in a few days. He knew that John was exactly the guy he needed on his side right now. Big John. Crazy John! John would put the fear of god into that asshole Mark. He was big and mean, a guy who enjoyed breaking arms and legs and heads. He was the perfect guy for the job. And Jerry agreed with him even though he’d never met John before.

The next morning, the first Mark began to ask himself what he'd gone and gotten himself into the night before. And he also asked himself why he had done what he'd done. He really didn't dislike the guy at all—why he hadn't even disliked Greywolf until that one day when he caught him with his girlfriend. And this other guy was no worse than Greywolf. If only he hadn't been so damned drunk when he walked into that bar the night before, he never would have started the fight, and then he wouldn't have gotten himself into this situation.

But it was too late now. He couldn't change what he'd already done. He'd taken a stand. He'd told the guy to get out of town, and there was no backing down now. He'd threatened the guy right there in front of the whole town, and there was nothing to do now but to go through with it. Why, even if he wanted to, there was no way he could let this thing go now after what the guy had said about his old lady. His reputation was at stake, and there was no going back.

He saw both of his friends during the day, and he discussed the matter with each of them. But the responses he received from them were nowhere near the same. When he talked to Sean, the local rich kid and tough guy wannabe, all he got were nods of approval and whole-hearted agreement. When he talked it over with Dave, though—Dave who had worked on the tugs with Greywolf and had been the one who first introduced him to their circle of friends—he was told to let it go, to forget about it. His reputation as a tough guy was already good enough to withstand a few drunken insults. He should just go on like nothing ever happened.

Mark listened to both of them, but there was never any real question about whose advice he'd end up taking. He was into this thing, and he wasn't going back. He was going forward. And that meant that he'd have to run the guy out of town, or at least to humiliate him in some way. Push him until he backed down, that's what he'd have to do. He'd have to push him. He'd have to do something to keep this thing going, to take it to the next level.

The other Mark felt like he'd come out of the confrontation in pretty good shape. He'd stood up to them when he was outnumbered three to one, and he'd held his ground. He'd shown those guys that he couldn't be pushed around, and he felt like he was ready to face them again next time he ran into them around town. He wouldn't pick a fight with them, though, he'd just stand his ground and look at them and nod maybe. Nothing hostile, but nothing that showed any fear, either. He'd just wait and watch and hope, hope that it was all over and that they wouldn't make another move.

But they did make another move, as he found out a couple of days later when he went to get into his car. Because as soon as he saw the car, he saw Mark and Sean's handiwork: tires punctured, windshield smashed and the words "get out" scratched into the paint. His shock at the sight quickly turned into anger, and his anger pushed him into action, so that no sooner had he finished yelling and cursing and stomping up and down the street than he was on his way back into his apartment to call up his posse—Jerry—and go have this thing out. Those guys had gone too far. Way too far! And now it was time for them to pay. And he was just the guy to make them do it, too. In money or blood or whatever it took. They'd asked for it, and now it was time for him to collect.

Jerry arrived and looked at the car, and the first thing he said was that they should take pictures of it and get an estimate and start preparing their case for when they sued the assholes.

Sue them? Mark couldn't believe what he'd just heard. Sue them? He didn't want to sue them. He wanted to kill them. He wanted to break their faces. He didn't want to wait and build a case and go to court. He wanted to go after those guys and have it out with them now. Right now! Right here and right now, that was when he wanted his revenge.

Mark didn't have to repeat his position very many times before he convinced Jerry that he was serious. And once Jerry was convinced of that, it didn't take Mark much longer to convince him to come with him and drive him around and look for them, and to have this thing out. So figuring that Mark and his friends would probably be out at the old abandoned house on the edge of town, the old house they were in the process of rebuilding and restoring, that's where he told Jerry to take him.

They parked along the shoulder of the road and began walking up the gravel drive running by the house. And once they'd gone about halfway up the drive, they spotted Dave by the lumber pile out in front of the house. Dave spotted them at the same time, and he yelled something to his friends inside the house before turning back around to face them.

"Whatta you want around here?" asked Dave with unfeigned innocence, since he'd had nothing to do with the trashing of the car.

Mark and Jerry stopped when they were a short distance from Dave, and then Mark spoke. "We wanna see that asshole friend of yours, that Mark."

"He's busy now. He's inside the house."

"Well, you tell him to come out. I got something to say to him."

By this time, Sean had come out and joined Dave by the lumber pile, and now he butted into the conversation, saying in the meanest, toughest voice he could muster, "Ya know, this is private property. You're trespassing!"

"Don't gimme no horseshit about private property, you shit. Not after what you guys did to my car. You just tell that fuckin' faggot Mark to come out here."

"I told you this is private property."

"And I told you to get Mark. He's gonna pay for what you assholes did. I tell you that. He's gonna pay, one way or another!"

"Oh, did something happen to your car?" asked Sean mockingly.

"Yeah, the same thing that's gonna happen to this fuckin' house if you don't send Mark out here." Mark could barely contain his anger as he spoke.

Sean and Mark sparred back and forth several more times until finally the first Mark made his appearance, strolling calmly out to the lumber pile while cradling a hunting rifle in his arms. "Didn't you hear Sean tell you to get off this property? What are you, deaf?" he said in his roughest, toughest voice.

“I came here to collect for what you did to my car, you cocksucker. That’s what I came here for.”

“I don’t know nothin’ about your car. All I know is that you’re trespassing around here. Now get out!”

“You sure as hell *do* know about my car, you piece of shit. And you’re gonna pay for it, too. You’re gonna pay one way or another.”

At this point, the first Mark very demonstratively worked the bolt on his rifle back and forth and then held it up in a ready position pointed just over the head of the other Mark. Then he spoke as firmly as he possibly could, “You know, we shoot trespassers around here, and the law backs us up. So get the hell outa here before I shoot you. Both of you!”

Jerry now spoke up for the first time, saying in a low voice, “Come on, Mark. Let’s get outa here.”

“Yeah, you get outa here and stay outa here,” said the first Mark with growing self-confidence.

But the other Mark remained defiant. “No, you asshole. I came here to collect, and that’s what I’m gonna do.”

The first Mark now lowered his rifle until it pointed directly at the other Mark, and he stood silently in that posture. Jerry grabbed the other Mark by the arm and began dragging him back to the car. But this Mark was far from silent as he was being led away, repeating several times that, “You’ll pay for this, you asshole,” and also sending out a number of Fuck you’s. The first Mark’s only answer was to laugh and to return one or two of the Fuck you’s.

The first Mark was triumphant after this confrontation, and he asked his friends over and over again, “Did you see the way he ran away?” Yeah, we did. “Just like a scared little rabbit.” That’s right. “He won’t be back. He’ll be shittin’ himself for a week.” You’re right there.

Sean agreed with everything that Mark said, and he also agreed that Mark’s honor had now been avenged. He’d faced off with the guy and made him back down, made him run away. So it was all over now, and Mark had won.

Dave, on the other hand, wasn’t quite as enthusiastic in his support, as the victory had seemed to him far from complete. He knew that the other Mark had remained defiant as he’d left, and that in fact his last words had been threats of retaliation. So no, this thing wasn’t over yet, not by a long shot. But when he voiced his concern to the others, they overruled him and argued him down. Finally, though, they did agree with him that maybe they should keep their guard up, just in case.

It sure as hell wasn’t over as far as the other Mark was concerned. In fact, it was only just beginning. He was so mad that he couldn’t stop talking about it, and he couldn’t sit still for a moment. He had to pace around constantly and curse Mark and plot his revenge. He wanted to go right out that night and burn down their old house, but Jerry persuaded him that it wouldn’t be

a very good idea by reminding him of the penalties for arson. He wanted to hurt somebody, maybe kill somebody, but Jerry continued to disrupt his plans by playing the voice of reason. Why not wait and talk to Big John about it? His tug was due in that night. He could wait and see John tomorrow—after his anger had subsided a bit—and lay out his plans for revenge at that time.

Mark finally agreed to take Jerry's advice, and he spent the rest of the day restoring his car: getting the tires patched and buying a new windshield and looking for some product to cover up the scratches in the paint. But he was too nervous to eat anything all day, and then when he had a couple of beers in the evening, they went straight to his head. He was feeling quite drunk, and he was still way too wound up to sleep or even think about sleeping, so he decided instead to drive down to the dock. And there he waited and waited some more until John's tug finally tied up at three in the morning.

John listened to Mark's story on the ride home, and he was immediately sucked into it, heart and soul. He got especially carried away when he heard how the first Mark had pointed a gun at his friend, and he swore repeatedly that, "We're not gonna take that shit."

When they reached John's apartment, he set straight to rummaging through drawers and closets and pulling out the assortment of guns he had stashed there, checking their condition and handing them to Mark or laying them out on the table. John also found some amphetamines that he'd left in the apartment, and each of them took a handful, after which they sat up for the rest of the night drinking vodka and playing with the guns and plotting their revenge.

Mark could see why they called him Crazy John. He could see that the nickname was no joke. But still, he was so mad at the time that he just didn't care. He didn't care where John was leading him, because John was talking about revenge, and revenge was the only thing that Mark could think about at that moment. It was the only thing that he cared about.

And he should have seen just how deep he was getting when he saw the expression on Jerry's face that morning, after he and John had gone over to Jerry's place to bring him into their plans. But the sight didn't register with him at all. And in fact, he thought Jerry's hesitation to join them was a sign of cowardice, not one of common sense.

Poor Jerry, he was in a spot. He was the one who had insisted on talking to John before they did anything, John whom he'd never met before and whose reputation he'd mistakenly assumed to be exaggerated. And now as it turned out, John was standing there in front of him, loaded down with handguns—one in a shoulder holster and two stuck inside his belt—and telling him to get ready for a fight. In spite of his shock, he tried to talk the two of them out of it, but he soon saw that it was no use. Their minds were made up and so, fearing John even more than he feared their enemies, he did the only sensible thing he could do. He gave in to their taunting and their pugnacious logic and agreed to go with them.

The first Mark was surprised that morning when he saw his enemy returning to the old house, and he was even more surprised to see that he'd brought along additional reinforcements. But he had no time to stop and think about what their appearance might mean, as they were already so close when he first saw them that he only had time to react. He went straight for his

rifle and at the same time yelled out to his friends to come and help, yelled in a voice that quavered with a fear of which he'd been completely unaware.

Sean grabbed the pistol that he now kept in the house and joined Mark by the door, and Dave also joined them, coming unarmed. The three of them stepped outside and formed a line showdown-style, and then they began to walk forward. The other Mark and his friends had gone up the gravel drive past the lumber pile to the bottom of the driveway and then turned to walk straight up the driveway toward the house. And they too walked in a line, showdown-style.

The two groups stopped advancing once they'd reached showdown-distance, and they stood staring at each other and sizing each other up. No one said anything at first. They just stared. The first Mark wanted to say something, but he was afraid his voice would give away his fear the way it had a couple of minutes ago. Meanwhile, the other Mark looked onto the scene through a haze of alcohol and amphetamines and the emotional leftovers of a full night of macho posturing, and he had to keep asking himself if what he was seeing was real or a dream.

Finally, the first Mark took a few deep breathes to steady his voice and then spoke, "I already told you once there's no trespassing around here." And he started to work the bolt on his rifle, repeating the gesture that he'd used so successfully the day before.

Big John reacted to the gesture by pulling his coat open to reveal the guns he was carrying. Sean panicked when he saw this and started to raise his own gun, and immediately John and Mark pulled out theirs. Someone fired—no one was quite sure who—and soon bullets were flying everywhere.

Jerry had started running away as soon as he'd seen the others go for their guns, and the unarmed Dave ran for the house once the shooting started. "Oh, shit!" yelled Mark, who was instantly shocked into sobriety, and he began to fire and retreat and fire again. Mark and Sean did the same, with Sean firing wildly over his shoulder as he ran, and so did Big John, who calmly aimed and fired at everything that moved as he backed away. Dave was hit in full stride, and he fell and skidded on his face and chest as more shots rang out. Mark was hit in the leg, and he dropped and rolled around in pain while the others continued to scatter. Sean reached cover where he squatted and poked his head out in search of a target, and soon Mark was doing the same. John fired until he finished his clip, and then he, too, ran for shelter while fumbling around for another gun.

And so all at once, there was silence, a silence that was broken only by Mark's groans and his writhing efforts to drag himself away. Dave lay motionless where he'd fallen, his life slowly oozing away into the dirt, while the others crouched in their hiding places, waiting and listening, unsure whether they should resume firing or flee the scene or come out and deal with the aftermath.



## THE NO SEE

The driver had warned me about the No See before he dropped me off here at this freeway off-ramp, but of course I just laughed him off. I mean, what a stupid name for a monster: the No See. Anybody would laugh at a name like that, right? If it at least had a good name, I might have taken it a bit more seriously. But No See? The driver told me that it came from some old Indian who called it that many years ago when he first told the white men about it, and that afterwards, the name just stuck. Or anyway, that's the legend according to the driver.

He told me all sorts of stuff about this No See monster that supposedly lives in this part of Wyoming, and I just listened to him and said, "Yeah, yeah," because that's what you do when you're hitch-hiking. You listen to the driver and you agree with him. But even though you agree on the outside, on the inside you still make your own decisions, and I'd already decided that he was full of shit. So when he tried to convince me to go with him to the town where he was going, to a place where he said I'd be safe, I just said, "No thanks. Drop me off right here at the off-ramp." I felt plenty safe out here on the road.

And now here I am, at this deserted off-ramp in the middle of the night, and it's cold—it's February and there's snow on the ground. I look the situation over for just a minute, and then I figure that my best bet is to look for someplace warm where I can hole up for the rest of the night before getting back on the road at dawn. There's a gas station here at the off-ramp, but it's closed just like the driver said it would be—he said that no one would work alone out here at night because of the No See.

I start checking the place out, looking for a warm spot that I can crawl into, but the place is locked up tight. And I mean tight. There are locks and bolts and bars and reinforcing bars everywhere you look. Why, I probably couldn't break into this place with a jackhammer. Not that I'd ever break into it, you understand. I just want to find some warm place that's unlocked and then crawl inside. But there's no such luck.

As I'm looking the place over, I'm asking myself why they have so many locks on everything. Are they afraid someone's gonna break into the bathroom and steal the soap? The only unusual thing I see about the place is that there are scratch marks on a couple of the doors, like a bear once tried to break into the place. And I ask myself if that could be the reason why; because they're afraid of a bear breaking in. I never would have thought that there are bears around this part of Wyoming, and even if there are, I ask myself: Why all the overkill? Why do they have so many more locks and reinforcements than you'd ever need to keep out a bear?

Well, whatever the answer to that question is, I'm getting cold standing around here. I've gotta find someplace warm. I can see the lights of town not too far away, off in the opposite direction from where the driver was going, so I start out walking in that direction.

It's a dark night and it takes a little while for my eyes to adjust to the darkness after I leave the lights of the closed-up gas station, but eventually I can see pretty well thanks to the white snow that's all around. It's a quiet night, too. Dead quiet, with the type of silence you can only find on a cold winter night. And the only time that the silence is broken is when an occasional car or truck passes by on the Interstate. But there's no traffic at all on the road leading

to town and no noise coming from the town, so the further I walk down the road, the more profound the silence becomes.

As I'm walking along the dark road, I start thinking about some of the things that the driver told me, some of the things he said about the No See. Of course I think about them. Who wouldn't think about them in a dark, deserted place like this? I'm laughing to myself as I remember how he told me that it only comes out and hunts at night, and as I remember how I'd wanted to say to him that maybe that's why no one's ever seen it. Because it only comes out when it's dark. And of course lots of things can be invisible in the dark, like a black dog or a black bear for instance. But I never actually said it to him. I just held it in and laughed inside.

He had some explanation about how its eyes or its skin or something couldn't stand too much light, but whatever his explanation was, I think that he probably just made it up. I mean, if it's real and nobody's ever seen it, then how are they gonna know details like that about it?

If it's real? Did I just say if it's real? I must be letting that damn story get to me. Of course it's not real. How could it be real?

I've gotta think about something else for awhile, like some of the places I've been or some of the people I've known. Or maybe women; maybe I should think about women. That's always a good way to get my mind off something, so that's what I'll do. I'll think about women. I'm sure it'll work a lot better than thinking about baseball.

So I'm walking along and I'm thinking about Sharon. I'm thinking about her, and I'm thinking about her luscious breasts, and I'm thinking about her milky white thighs. I'm not thinking about dark nights or monsters at all. But then I slowly become aware of something, of a strange smell, of something I'm smelling now that I've never smelled before.

It's like a skunk, although it's nothing like a skunk, if you know what I mean. It's like some nasty animal smell, though it's not like any animal I've ever smelled before. And as I'm thinking about the smell, I remember something the driver said about how the No See smells. He said it has a real bad odor, a nasty odor that's all its own. He said it stinks in a way that no other animal stinks. In fact, come to think of it, he described a stink that's a lot like what I'm smelling right now. The stink of the No See!

Oh, come on, Greywolf. Snap out of it! Don't let your imagination run away with you. That thing you're smelling is probably just a garbage dump or a dead animal or something. Or maybe it's a toxic waste dump. Yeah, that's it, that's what it is: a toxic waste dump. But out here on the outskirts of Nowhere, Wyoming? Why would they put a toxic waste dump right here? But then again, why not? Why not put one here by this town?

I stop and check the breeze, and though there's not much of it, it seems to be coming from off to my right. So I look as hard as I can in that direction, but there's nothing to see out there. No creature, no movement, nothing but snow and fields. I look and look, but it's no use, so I start walking again. I try to think about Sharon's milky white thighs again, but that's no use either. My mind's just not in that place anymore.

I'm walking along and the smell keeps getting stronger as I go, and I start to tell myself that maybe I was wrong before about the direction of the breeze. Maybe it's coming from out ahead, and maybe I keep getting closer to whatever it is that stinks so bad, which would explain why the smell keeps getting stronger. I could stop a minute and check the direction of the breeze again, but why bother? It's gotta be coming from ahead, because that's the only good explanation for why the smell is getting stronger. So what good would stopping do me?

Now, I can see that just behind that first warehouse-looking building on the edge of town is a gas station. It's still pretty far away, but at least I can see it. And with any luck, there'll be someplace there that I can get in out of the cold. I'm walking a little faster now, and my mind is on the warmth and the rest that await me up ahead, when suddenly I hear a noise nearby, and I freeze—and my blood freezes, too.

What was that? I'm sure I heard something—or at least I think I heard something—but what was it? And where exactly did it come from? I look around and I listen, but there's nothing out there. Just snow and silence. The dead silence of a winter night. I look especially hard off to the right where earlier I'd thought that awful smell was coming from, but there's nothing there, nothing at all to see or hear.

So I start walking again, walking fast now so that I'll reach the gas station that much sooner, when I hear another noise. And this time I'm sure that I hear it. I'm sure that it isn't just my imagination. I stop and look off to the right where the sound just came from, and I listen, too, but I don't see or hear a thing. I call out softly, "Hello, is someone there?" because the noise I heard sounded like footsteps, but I don't get an answer. I'm scared shitless now, and I'm wishing that I'd listened to that driver and let him take me to the town where he was going. Because I'm getting this awful feeling that maybe the No See is real after all. Maybe it's real and it's hungry and it's after me!

I'm trying to think of what to do, of how to defend myself, but I know that I'm not carrying any sort of weapons, so the only thing I can do is to try and find safety at the gas station or somewhere else in town. I start walking again and, after a few steps, I'm running. I keep trying to run faster and faster, and as I run, I can hear the footsteps behind me. I hear them getting louder and closer all the time. I hear them catching up to me.

I'm in a complete panic now as I hear snorting and breathing along with the footsteps. It sounds like an animal running, like an animal that's chasing its prey—which is me! I'm running for all I've got, but it keeps getting closer and closer. I can't get away!! Then I feel something big hit me from behind. I feel it jumping onto my back and grabbing me and dragging me down. And I'm rolling around on the ground with this thing, and it's on top of me, and it's clawing me and biting me, and I'm fighting back with all the strength I've got, but it's no use. The thing is too big and too strong. I'm fighting it but I can't see it. I just feel it and hear it and smell it. I feel it claw me and bite me and bite me again. I feel it eating me!

I've gotta wake up. I've gotta wake up! I've gotta wake up!!

Ah, that's better.

Man, what a wild dream. I'm still shaking all over. And what a crazy idea: being attacked by the No See. I guess that driver's story must have gotten to me a lot more than I realized. Or maybe it's just because I'm so tired from so many days on the road, and because of this awful heat in here.

The heating system is constantly blowing hot air into the men's room where I'm sleeping, and it's so hot I can barely stand it. It must be over a hundred degrees in here. I'm stripped down to just my pants, and still I'm covered in sweat. It'd almost be a relief to go outside for awhile, out into the cold. But I don't think I'll do it. I'll just sweat it out here until morning. I wouldn't want to go outside with the No See prowling around, ha, ha, ha.

The horrible No See; what a crock of shit. I didn't get attacked by it and I didn't get eaten by it. I just walked to this gas station on the edge of town and found the men's room door unlocked and went inside and made myself at home. That was all that happened. The rest of that stuff was just a dream. Or most of it was. Or at least some of it was. I mean, sure I smelled something strange when I was walking down here, and maybe I even heard something, although I can't say for certain, and I even ran the last part of the way. I'll admit it. But there was no monster after me. I just got a little spooked from walking in the dark. That's all that happened.

So here I am lying on the floor of this men's room, trying to relax and get back to sleep. And what is it that my mind wants to think about? It wants to think about more of the stuff that the driver told me. It wants to think about the story of the No See.

Because that driver sure knew how to tell a story. He just went on and on. Like he told me about some parapsychologist who came here to study the No See. But when he said the guy was a parapsychologist, I just laughed him off inside even more than before. I mean, give me a break. A parapsychologist? That's one of those guys who sees UFOs every time he goes out for a drive in the country. UFOs and ghosts and whatever else; even things like No Sees.

So anyway, this parapsychologist came up with some theory about it. He said that its skin or fur is some color that's outside our color spectrum, which is why we can't see it. That's his "scientific" explanation, though of course it's total bullshit. Because who besides a loony would ever talk about a color outside our spectrum? They're all inside our spectrum or else they wouldn't be colors, right? So anyway, after reaching this ridiculous conclusion, he went on to use it to explain why the No See only hunts at night, which is because it can't take too much light from within our spectrum. It can't take direct sunlight.

And the driver had already told me about that part, about how it never hunts in the daytime except maybe in rare cases when it's really hungry. Or maybe sometimes very early in the morning if it's still on the trail of some prey. But he said that most of the time, it just goes off somewhere to sleep in the daytime.

The driver knew all sorts of stories about the No See and about animals and even people who had been eaten by it, and as I lie here trying to get back to sleep, I'm remembering them one after the other. I know I've gotta think about something else, though, if I don't want to give myself another nightmare. So I direct my thoughts toward something more pleasant, toward Sharon and her milky white thighs. But no, it's probably not a good idea to think too much about

sex right now when I'm sleeping in some gas station bathroom. I've gotta think about something else. Like how about some of the things I did and the people I knew in Nova Scotia before I left. Or how about the things I'll do when I get to California, the old friends I'll see, the old haunts I'll visit. Or how about Texas last year? I could think about that crazy cowboy I hung out with in Houston, the one who was always talking about fights and looking for fights and living for fights. Or there's that time in California a few years ago when I got a ride from that guy going through the divorce. I remember how he told me he was going to take me all the way to Oroville or someplace, but then how he started making detours before we even got out of town, visiting his friends and his ex-wife and his ex-wife's new boyfriend, and how he dragged me—a hitch-hiker and a total stranger—into the middle of the fight over his divorce. What a crazy ride that one was.

As I'm lying here with my mind drifting, I'm slowly becoming aware of an unusual smell. It's a strange, nasty smell, but I recognize it right away: it's the smell of the No See. Or at least, it's the same thing I smelled earlier when I was walking to this gas station, the thing that my imagination made me think was the smell of the No See. The smell is real unpleasant, but at least it's not too strong, so my mind drifts back to other things. But the smell keeps getting stronger and stronger, and pretty soon I'm thinking about getting out of this bathroom and going out into the cold. I mean, it's already bad enough to have all this hot air blowing in on me, but now that the heater intakes are picking up that smell and blowing it in here along with the heat, it's getting to be almost impossible to take.

But just as I'm about to get up and go outside, the intensity of the smell finally starts to diminish—Good, the wind must have shifted—and I start to relax again. Now I can let my mind wander again as I try to get back to sleep. But then suddenly I hear a noise outside, and immediately I'm wide awake and tense and listening for more. I listen hard and, after a moment, I hear it again. And the thing I hear is exactly the one thing I don't want to hear right now. The thing I hear is the sound of someone walking around outside the gas station.

I'm afraid it might be the guy who runs the gas station, and I really don't want him to catch me in here. Though now that I think about it, all I'm doing is sleeping in his men's room, which wasn't even locked, so the worst he'd probably do is throw me out into the cold. That wouldn't be so bad. In fact, that would be better than the other alternative. Because what if it isn't a person I'm hearing outside? What if it's the No See?

Oh, come on now! I've been through all that No See bullshit. I've been over it and over it, and there's no such thing. There can't be.

The sounds keep getting closer and closer until they're right outside the door, and I brace myself to come face to face with an angry gas station owner. Or even worse, on some level I'm bracing myself to confront the No See. The door to the men's room isn't locked, and I'm expecting to see the knob turn at any moment.

But it doesn't turn. I hear whoever it is—or whatever it is—push on the door, but he doesn't turn the knob. And I hear him moving around, and I hear him breathing. Breathing and snorting—My God!—he sounds just like the No See did in my dream! Now, I'm really freaking out.

He—or it—pushes on the door again, and then I hear the most awful scratching sound, like great big claws are digging into the door. I'm up like a shot to hold the door shut, and as I brace against it with my shoulder, the thing outside starts to pound on the door. It hits the door and hits it again, and then it goes back to scratching a few more times before pounding on the door again.

It's hitting the door so hard that it sends shock waves clear from my shoulder down through my whole body. It's hitting so hard that I know I can't hold the door closed much longer. It hits the door again and again, and then suddenly the door frame splits apart and the door comes flying open and I go sprawling backwards.

I can feel it jumping on top of me, biting and clawing. I can feel it and hear it and smell it, but I can't see it. I can feel it biting me and clawing me and biting me. I can feel it eating me!

I've gotta wake up. I've gotta wake up! I've gotta wake up!!

Ah, good, it was just another dream. Just another nightmare about that goddamned No See. Christ, I wish I'd never heard those stories from that driver. Because then I'd be able to get a good night's sleep. Then I wouldn't be having all these stupid-ass nightmares.

I'm still lying on the floor of the men's room, covered with sweat like before, but I see that I've got my feet propped up against the door like I've been trying to hold it closed in my sleep. That's too much! I'm getting way too carried away with these nightmares.

I try to relax again, but it's even harder now than before to get my mind onto something else besides the No See. I finally succeed in dozing off, but no sooner am I asleep than I'm having the nightmare again. And it happens the next time I fall asleep, too, and the time after that.

Finally, when I awaken from one of my nightmares, I see light coming through the crack at the bottom of the door, and I know that it's morning. I've gotta get going right away, before the gas station owner shows up and catches me in here, so I get to my feet. I find that I can barely stand because my legs are so tired and sore from having pushed on the door all night to hold it closed against the No See. I get dressed and grab my backpack, and then I crack the door open and peak outside. I don't want to go charging out until I'm sure there's no one out there to catch me coming out.

As I go outside, I notice something strange about the door: it's got scratches on it. Big, deep scratches like a bear had been clawing at it or something. And the scratches look kinda fresh, too. I ask myself if they were there a few hours ago when I went inside, and I honestly don't know the answer. I didn't notice them at the time, and they'd be pretty hard to miss, but still that doesn't prove anything. After all, it was dark and I was tired. I was in a big hurry to get in out of the cold and get some sleep. So, who knows?

I look around to see if there are any tracks or any other signs to indicate that some animal had been prowling around the area, but I don't see anything. And I start to feel relieved until I remember something else that driver had said about how the No See never leaves any tracks. It was some mystery that he couldn't explain, one that even the parapsychologist couldn't explain.

But for some reason there were never any tracks around a spot where it made a kill, just the remains of the victim. The only exception was that sometimes in the snow or on soft, muddy ground, there might be some very slight indentations. And so with this in mind, I examine the nearby snow.

I think I see some indentations, so I move over and examine them more closely, but I'm still not sure. They could be indentations, and then again, they could be nothing. I look at them for some time, but I can't decide, so finally I just say, "Fuck it," and I'm on my way back to the Interstate.

I walk along the side of the road and I look at the Interstate up ahead, and I check to see how much traffic there is at this time of the morning. I'm thinking about getting back on the road and making some miles, and I'm thinking about California and the things I'll do there, and I'm thinking about seeing Sharon again—Sharon and her milky white thighs. I'm thinking pleasant thoughts. I'm thinking warm and comfortable thoughts. But then I slowly become aware of something else: that smell! I can smell that smell again, the one I smelled last night when I walked over to the gas station, and the one I kept smelling over and over again in my nightmares. What a way to ruin a perfectly good string of happy thoughts.

So now I'm back to thinking about the smell, and I'm wondering where it's coming from. I look around for a toxic waste dump, but even now in the daylight, I don't see anything but snow and fields and a few trees. I'm not really all that nervous about it, though. I mean, I'm thinking about the No See, sure, but I'm not worried about it. After all, it's daytime now, and it only hunts at night, right? So what's to worry about?

I'm walking along and the smell is getting stronger, when finally I notice something off to the side of the road. I notice a lump of something, something like a dead animal, and as I get closer, I see that it's a dead skunk. And not only is it dead, but it's decayed.

Now I understand what that smell is, that smell that's like a skunk but not like a skunk. It's the smell of a skunk that's been dead for a long time. It's the combination of a skunk's odor mixed in with the stink of a dead animal. That's what it is. And now I feel so relieved that I laugh out loud. I laugh and laugh like a crazy man, and I'm thinking to myself, It sure is a good thing there's nobody out here to see me right now.

So this is what had me so scared. This is what triggered all those nightmares: a dead skunk. Because that's all it ever was. Nothing but a dead skunk and some stupid scare stories that I heard from the driver who dropped me off here. What an idiot I am to ever have fallen for it!

I continue walking on past the dead skunk, and I notice that the smell is starting to get weaker. Or is it really? Is it just my imagination, or is it actually getting weaker? For a few moments I'm not sure, and I turn the thing over and over in my mind trying to decide. Is it getting weaker or stronger or what? What's happening?

And then it hits me like a bolt of lightning. It's not getting weaker at all! It's getting stronger! But how can that be? The dead skunk is back there behind me. I'm getting farther away from it all the time. How can its odor be getting stronger?

I'm not feeling relieved anymore, and I'm not laughing, either. In fact, all the old fear has come rushing back in with such speed and such force that I'm on the verge of panic. I'm about to start running, but I don't know which way to go. Toward the Interstate or toward the gas station or where? Where should I go, and what should I do once I get there? What good would it do me to go to either place? I take a few deep breathes to calm myself, and it helps a little despite the fact that by doing so, I'm breathing in just that much more of that nasty, disgusting, frightening smell.

I'm not going to run now, but I see nothing wrong with walking fast. Because the sooner I get to the Interstate, the sooner I'll have a chance of getting a ride out of this place—out of this nightmare.

I'm walking faster and faster. I'm walking as fast as I can. And I'm not looking around. I'm not trying to figure out where the smell is coming from. I'm not even paying attention to the smell. And when I start to hear footsteps behind me, I still don't look around. I just keep on walking.

I hear those footsteps getting getting closer and closer, and I hear the snorting and breathing, but I tell myself I'll ignore it and I won't start running. I won't run. I won't run. Oh, shit! maybe I will run.

I'm running but still it's getting closer. It's right behind me. I can almost feel it breathing down the back of my neck. And then I do feel its weight on my back as it lunges on top of me, and I'm falling down and I'm rolling over and over. I'm trying to fight it off, but I can't see it. I just feel it and smell it and hear it. I feel it biting and biting me and clawing me and biting me again.

I feel it eating me! I feel it tearing me apart!

I've gotta wake up. I've gotta wake up! I've gotta wake up!!



## ME AND MY PARTNERS

I don't know why Ray and Bill acted so surprised when I walked into the old log cabin on our claim that day, because they should have been expecting me. After all, our agreement had been that we'd meet back at the claim in the spring to wash out all the dirt we had dug up in the fall and then split up the gold we found. So even though I was a couple of weeks late getting back, they still should have known that I'd show up sooner or later.

But as soon as they heard me at the door of the cabin, they both started rushing around almost like they were hiding something. And Ray even shoved the door closed when I started to open it, and he wouldn't let me in for a couple of minutes. When he finally let me in, I asked them what it was that they were hiding, and Bill answered real quickly, "Nothing!"

Ray took a bit longer to answer, saying, "It's, uh...it's...it's a surprise."

"A surprise?"

"Yeah, a surprise...for you...for your birthday."

"Oh, I get it." And I thought that was really nice of them to be making a present for me. But then I remembered that my birthday wasn't for another four months, and when I said something about it, Ray just answered, "Well, that's why it's a surprise." And that seemed like a good explanation, so I didn't say anything more about it.

I was a little bit tired, since it's forty-something miles from Carmacks to the claim and it had taken me most of the morning to walk there, but I was still anxious to know if they'd found any gold in the dirt they'd washed out. Bill answered me real quickly again, "Nope. None. Not a bit."

I found that hard to believe, so Ray went into more detail. He told me that they'd already washed out all the dirt from our test trench and that they hadn't found a thing, not one flake of gold. I still thought that sounded kinda funny, and Ray agreed with me. "Yeah, can you believe it? There must be gold everywhere else in this area except right here where our claim is. That's really something, huh, Greywolf? That's some bad luck."

Well, that convinced me. I could hear how sincere he was about our bad luck. And then right away, as soon as I told him that I believed him, he pulled out some paper that he wanted me to sign. He said it would let me out of our partnership, and that if I signed it, I wouldn't be stuck with a share in this worthless claim. I thanked him for his thoughtfulness, but I told him that I didn't mind. In fact, I liked being partners with the two of them and I didn't care if we never found any gold.

He was real pushy about me signing the paper, but I told him over and over that I wouldn't do it. I said that signing it would be like giving up my friendship with the two of them, and that that friendship meant more to me than all the gold in the world. He and Bill looked at each other when I said it, and they kinda rolled their eyes, which I guess must have meant that

they agreed with me. Because it wasn't long afterwards that Ray shook his head and put the paper away.

Bill said something to him about "Plan B," but I didn't know what it was that they were talking about.

The next day after breakfast, Bill and Ray kept talking about some place in another part of the Yukon where there was supposed to be a lot of gold and where they were hoping to go prospecting, but both of them had problems that made it impossible for them to go. They sounded so disappointed when they talked about it that I volunteered, "Well, what about me? I could go there and prospect." And both of them smiled big smiles and nodded at each other when they heard me say it.

I asked them when I should leave, and Ray said, "Right now," and at the same time Bill went out to start the truck. I told them that I needed to pack my gear, but Ray said, "Don't worry, it's already packed and in the truck."

Boy, talk about psychic or something. It was like they already knew beforehand that I'd want to go out there and go prospecting.

We drove to Carmacks and got into the helicopter that Bill was part owner of, and the three of us took off. We flew a long way, out into very remote country to the north of the North MacMillan, and then Bill started looking for a landing spot. I thought they had some real specific spot in mind for me to prospect in, but Ray said to Bill that it didn't matter where they left me. He said that any place would do out there. I asked him if they'd be able to find the same spot in two weeks when they were supposed to come back and get me, and he said not to worry about it. He said they had that all figured out.

Bill found a clear spot and landed the helicopter, and I got out with my gear, and then before I even had time to say goodbye, they were already taking off again. Ray yelled out to me, "So long, sucker," and he and Bill both laughed. And I laughed, too, even though I didn't know what the joke was all about.

I soon found out why they were laughing, though, when I went to unpack my gear. Because it turned out that the seabag full of gear wasn't really full of gear at all. It was full of rocks and dirt. Nothing but rocks and dirt. So that there I was, stuck out in the wilderness with no food and no shelter and not even any ammo for my rifle. Just a useless rifle and my pocket knife and a few matches that I had in my pocket. Nothing else.

What a pair of jokers! Especially that Ray. I cracked up laughing so hard when I saw the joke that they'd just pulled on me. Leaving me out here in the middle of nowhere like this. It made me laugh for the longest time.

And as I laughed, I remembered some of the other jokes that Ray was always pulling. Like I especially remembered that time when we were writing up our partnership agreement, and Ray had added a phrase to it saying that if any of the partners died, the surviving partners would split up his share among them. When I read that phrase, I asked him if he had a reason for including it, like if he was planning on killing Bill or me if we found a bunch of gold. And he

said to me, “If you or Bill had a gold tooth, I’d kill both of you for it.” And he said it in such a serious way that I was stunned for a couple of seconds. But then I cracked up. What a joker! I told him how funny he was, but he never even smiled or anything. He just said a couple of times that he was serious, and each time he said it, it made me laugh even harder. I didn’t see how he could keep a straight face when he was saying that type of stuff.

Well, I waited for a couple of days for them to come back, but then I realized that it was an even bigger joke than I’d been thinking, and that they weren’t going to come back at all. So I walked to Ross River instead, laughing all the way at this great joke that they’d pulled on me.

It took me over a week to make that little hike of just a few hundred miles. I’m almost ashamed to admit that it took so long, but there were reasons why it did. And they’re reasons, too, not excuses; I’m not making excuses here. All I’m doing is telling you what happened. Because first of all, I decided I needed food, so I tracked down a moose and clubbed it with my rifle butt. And then I had to jerky the meat and carry the six hundred pounds of jerky with me—there are children starving in Africa, you know, so we should never waste food. And on top of carrying that extra weight, there were two rivers to cross along the way, which meant that I had to stop at each one and cut down trees and build rafts using nothing but my pocket knife.

But enough about that. Eventually, I reached Ross River, and I took a bus to Carmacks, and I hiked back out to the claim. And man was Ray surprised to see me when I walked into the cabin, because he almost fell over like he was in shock. I asked him where Bill was, but it took him a long time before he could answer. His mouth was moving like he was trying to talk, but no sound was coming out until finally he said, “He’s dead.”

So the story was true. The story I’d heard in Carmacks was true. It wasn’t just a joke like I’d thought it was at the time. Bill had really been attacked and killed by a bear while I was gone.

I asked Ray about the rest of the story, about how the RCMP was suspicious because the claw marks on Bill’s body looked kinda phony and because it turned out that he also had a bullet in his heart, but Ray said he didn’t want to talk about any of that stuff. And neither did I, for that matter, because it was so sad, so very, very sad to find out that I’d lost one of my best friends in the whole world. Why, if I hadn’t still had Ray at that moment, I don’t know what I would have done.

The next day, Ray said that he wanted to drive back to town, and he wanted me to come along and keep him company. I guessed he was still sad about poor Bill, so I went with him to try to cheer him up. Then, after we’d gone about fifteen miles or so, he told me that he heard a funny noise coming from underneath the truck. I didn’t hear a thing, but he kept insisting that he did, and finally he stopped and asked me to get out and see what it was.

I was halfway under the truck when suddenly it started to move. And it didn’t just move a little bit, either, but it took off fast like his foot had slipped off the clutch or something. I didn’t know if it was another one of his jokes or if it was an accident, because all I had time to do was to get out of the way, which I did all except for my left leg.

I heard the bones crunch as the truck ran over my leg, and then as I lay there in the road, I saw the truck shift into reverse and come roaring back at me at full speed. I rolled out of the way

before it hit me and then, when the truck came racing toward me again, this time driving forward, I rolled off down the hill on the side of the road. The truck swerved over in my direction like Ray was aiming at me, and it almost went off the road, too, and down the hill behind me.

I was still wondering if it had been an accident, but then when Ray went and turned the truck around at a wide spot in the road and drove off back toward the cabin, I realized that it wasn't, but that it was another one of his jokes instead. Because if it had been an accident, he would have at least stopped to ask me how I was before he drove off and left me, right? So I knew that it was a joke, but somehow it didn't seem like it was quite as funny as the last one had been.

Anyway, I found a fork in a tree branch where I could hook my foot while I set the broken bones in my leg, and then I tied on a splint and made myself a crutch, and an hour later, I was back at the cabin.

As soon as I walked in, I told Ray what I thought about his latest joke, but he acted like he didn't want to talk about it. He just mumbled stuff to himself about having to find some way to kill that idiot and about it being too suspicious if he shoots another one and about finding some other way to kill him and stuff like that. I could see that he was upset about his joke falling flat the way it had, so I tried to cheer him up by saying that I was just kidding, that I really thought his latest joke was just as funny as his earlier one had been, or even funnier for that matter. But he must have known that I was lying to him, because he just went on mumbling like he hadn't even heard me.

Ray seemed to be feeling better that evening, and he told me that as a way of apologizing, he was going to make me an extra special supper. He wouldn't let me help him with it, and he even made me go outside so I wouldn't see the special ingredients he was putting into it. He wouldn't let me help him with anything at all, and he got all upset when I grabbed the plates myself and took them over to the bench that we used as a table. He kept asking me which plate was which, like each one of us had our own special plate and he was afraid that I might have mixed them up.

Well, when I ate it, the food wasn't all that special. It was just beans, and they even had a kinda funny flavor to them. But I told him that they were delicious, just to try to cheer him up.

A funny thing happened while we were eating, because there was this gopher that used to come into the cabin sometimes. Well, it came in while we were eating, and it ate a couple of the beans that I'd spilled on the floor, and shortly after it ate them, it started shaking and throwing fits, and then it fell over stone dead. I pointed it out to Ray, but he acted like he hadn't seen a thing. I guess he didn't want to admit that his beans tasted that bad. And they really were pretty bad, because they gave me a case of indigestion and gas, too. Gas like you wouldn't believe. And poor Ray, he had to sleep in that cabin with me all night while I was smelling the place up so bad. I really felt sorry for him.

In the morning, he came over and poked me a couple of times like he was checking to see if I was still alive. I guess my farts must have been that bad. And he acted kinda surprised when I

rolled over and started to apologize to him about the smell, because he didn't say a word back to me. He just started mumbling again about killing the idiot.

Later on that morning, Ray recommended that I go for a walk over to where our test trench was. He said it would be good for my leg. That sounded kinda funny to me, because I'd always thought that you were supposed to rest a broken leg, not exercise it. But Ray told me that he knew what he was talking about, so I took his word for it.

I'd only gone a short distance from the cabin when I suddenly felt something ricochet off the back of my head, and at the same time, I heard the sound of a rifle shot behind me. I knew it had to be a bullet that had bounced off my head, and though I didn't have time to stop and think about it at the time, it sure was a good thing that I have such an extra-thick skull. Because if that bullet had gone through my skull and into my brain, it could have really hurt. But as it was, it just bounced off and I hardly felt a thing.

I turned around to ask Ray what was going on, but just as I turned, he fired again and the bullet went through my side. It missed my heart by a good four or five inches. I yelled out to him, "Hey, Ray, it's me. It's your buddy Greywolf. Don't shoot," but he kept on shooting like he didn't hear me. I dodged the rest of the bullets until I finally stopped him the only way I could, which was by shooting the rifle out of his hands.

I hobbled over to him and started to tell him that his jokes just kept getting worse and worse, and that I was getting sick and tired of them. I mean, this shooting me was even less humorous than running over me with the truck had been, and I didn't hesitate to let him know it.

He didn't answer me, and he didn't mumble to himself, either. He just stood there like he was stunned, looking at me and looking down at his broken rifle. I apologized to him about the rifle, though I also made it pretty clear that I thought he had it coming for having used the rifle to shoot me. But he never said a word back to me. He just stood there and stood there, and then he started to cry, and finally he started to scream and went running off somewhere. And I didn't see him again for the rest of the day.

I hung around the cabin all day, wondering where my good friend Ray had gone and wondering when he might be coming back and wondering if I'd been too harsh with him. And then when he still hadn't returned, I went to bed alone in the cabin that night.

I was sound asleep when a rustling noise inside the cabin woke me up, and I opened my eyes just in time to see Ray lunging toward me with a great big hunting knife in his hand. I caught ahold of his arm as he landed on me, and then I threw him down onto the ground and wrenched the knife out of his hand. And I said, "Hey, welcome back, Ray." And I also told him that this was a pretty good joke he'd just pulled, this trying to stab me while I was sleeping. Of course, I didn't really think it was very funny, but I just said it to try to make him feel better.

It didn't seem to help much, though, as he started crying again while he was lying there on the floor, and he wouldn't answer me when I asked him what was wrong. But then after awhile, he got up and started rummaging around the cabin. He went over to a corner and pulled up one of the floorboards, and then he started pulling out some jars and carrying them out to the truck. It was funny because those jars looked to me like they were full of gold. In fact, I would

have sworn that they were full of gold if only I hadn't already known that there wasn't any gold in the cabin or anywhere else on our claim for that matter. And of course, I knew there wasn't any gold because Bill and Ray had both told me for a fact that there wasn't.

Ray took off in the truck, and he didn't come back all night, so the next day I decided to walk—or rather hobble—to Carmacks. When I got there, I went straight into Ray's favorite bar and asked the bartender if he'd seen him. The bartender said that he sure had, and then he went on to tell me about Ray coming in there and trying to hire someone to kill me. Why, the bartender even claimed that Ray had offered him a whole jar full of gold if only he'd kill me.

I knew right away that the bartender was lying, because Ray didn't have any gold to offer him. But somehow the story still bothered me, and I wondered if there might be some kernel of truth in it.

I tried the bar at the hotel next, and when I asked the bartender there about Ray, he went and told me the exact same story that the other bartender had just told. He even told the exact same lie about the jar full of gold. Can you imagine that? I asked myself: What are the chances of that?

I couldn't figure out what was happening, and I couldn't understand why two different people would tell me the exact same lie. But then it hit me like a revelation: Maybe they weren't lying after all. Maybe Ray really was trying to hire someone to kill me! The only part that I couldn't explain was the part about the jar full of gold, but I finally decided to just ignore it.

So now the full impact of the situation struck me, and I had to flee that bar as fast as I could. I rushed blindly down to the bank of the river, and there I sat. I sat and thought and let it sink in. I let the whole horrible reality of the situation sink in.

Ray's sense of humor had no limits to it, no limits whatsoever. Because now he was going to push that same tired joke about wanting to kill me all the way to the point of hiring someone to do it. Didn't the guy know when a joke wasn't funny anymore? Did he have no sense of proportion? Didn't he know when enough was enough?

As I sat there by the river, I finally came to a decision. And when I went back and saw the truck parked in front of Ray's favorite bar, I went inside determined to carry out that decision and have it out with him. Once and for all.

No sooner had I walked into the bar than Ray was jumping up and yelling, "There he is. That's him. Kill him! Somebody kill him!" And he went on and on yelling the same thing over and over again. He even pulled out a jar full of what looked like gold—in fact, it looked so much like it that it almost fooled me in spite of the fact that I knew better—and he waved that jar around and offered it to anyone who would kill me.

When I finally got a chance to get a word in, I spoke up and said, "Ray, this thing has gone far enough." But he acted like he hadn't heard me, and he went right on yelling. So I spoke again in a more forceful voice, "Ray, your joke isn't funny anymore. In fact, your sense of humor is getting to be very annoying." But again he ignored me and went right on yelling.

Now, I was determined to get through to him, and I yelled at him, “Ray, if you don’t stop this joking right here and right now, our partnership is over.”

That got his attention, because he suddenly stopped and stared at me and said, “Over? Our partnership is over?”

“That’s right! If you don’t stop joking about trying to kill me, it’s over. And I mean it!” I warned him.

“Oh, if I don’t?...If I don’t stop?...Kill him!! Kill him, you guys!!!”

“Okay, that’s it! It’s over! Forever!!” And I meant what I said.

Ray started laughing when he heard me say it, and then he kept laughing harder and harder until he was almost starting to lose control. But I had one more thing to take care of before I left, and I decided to bring it up right now. “Of course, there’s a financial consideration to take care of in dissolving our partnership.”

He suddenly stopped laughing and said to me, “A financial...?” and then he looked at the jar of imitation gold that he was holding in his hand, and he quickly hid it away in the pocket of his jacket. “You want a share...?”

“No, I’m not talking about shares in that worthless claim. I’m talking about my ten dollars. Because remember I’m the one who paid the money to register that claim last fall. And I want my ten dollars back, and I want them back now!”

Ray started laughing again, and he quickly went hysterical with it, falling down and rolling around on the floor as he laughed. Though before he completely lost control, he managed to pull out a ten dollar bill and give it to me.

So in the end, things worked out pretty well for everyone—everyone except poor Bill that is—because Ray seemed happy with our arrangement. In fact, an hour later, he was still lying on the floor of the bar and laughing his head off.

And as for me, I got my ten dollars back. And I didn’t even have to go hire some big city lawyer from Whitehorse to get it, either.

## A SPARK OF LIFE

What was wrong with my body? Didn't it know that it was already dead? Why did it insist on living? Why couldn't it just accept the fact and then lay down and die?

And what about my mind? What was wrong with it? Why did it keep trying to find ways to prolong my life when it knew that they were useless?

What was the point in continuing to struggle for life when submitting to death would be so simple? Why couldn't I just die?

Instead, my body insisted on surviving and on prolonging its suffering, and my mind, too, insisted on torturing me. Because not only did it refuse to give up, but at the same time, it wouldn't stop remembering. And the last thing I needed right now was memories. Especially not that memory.

But here it came again, and there I was again, standing by the tree and getting ready for my moment of truth. I was looking over the situation, looking at my raft and looking at the rope I had wrapped around the tree and looking at the next tree along the river bank, the one that seemed so far away, the one that I'd have to reach. I was testing the rope with my free hand again, checking to see if I'd be able to hold a strain against the rope, but once again I saw that it would be impossible. The swift current of the rapids was pulling way too hard on the big, heavy logs I'd used to build the raft. So my only hope was to reach the next tree before the river pulled what was left of the rope out of my hands. It was that or nothing. It was that or disaster.

And once again I was psyching myself up to go for it. All or nothing. Life or death. I refused to think about the stupid decisions I'd made that had gotten me into this situation in the first place. There'd be plenty of time to think about them later. Because right now, I had to concentrate on making it to that tree.

Once again, I was saying to myself, "Okay, Greywolf, this is it. You've gotta do it. You've gotta make it." And once again, I was starting out. I was unwrapping the rope from around the tree, and I was starting to run. The current was strong and the raft was immediately taking off down river. I was pulling whatever I could on the rope as I ran, but mainly I was just running as fast as I could. I was approaching the tree, but there was less rope in my hands all the time. I could feel it slipping away.

I had to make it. I had to.... I was there! I was at the tree and I had just enough rope left. I'd made it!

Now, why was it that each time I relived that scene in my mind, I made it to the tree in time, when I knew damned well that I hadn't made it? Why was that?

Was it just wishful thinking? Was I trying to change the past by changing my memories of it? Or was it because I didn't want to have to relive that awful, sick feeling of having the rope yanked out of my hands by the current and of watching my raft and all my gear float off down the river without me? Which was it?



Because now as I remembered what really happened, I was flooded again with all those emotions, those conflicting, confusing emotions. Like first of all the disbelief, the refusal to accept that it was really happening and the desire to take it back and try again. The feeling that somehow this event wasn't really final and irrevocable.

And at the same time, I felt angry at myself for having made those stupid decisions that had gotten me into this situation. Why had I decided to line the raft through those rapids when the raft was so heavy and the rope was so short, and when the rapids were so minor. Because they weren't even really rapids. They were just a stretch where the river was fast and bumpy, a stretch that I could easily have ridden through on the raft. But no, I'd decided to play it safe by lining the raft through. Safe!? What a laugh!

And what really made it stupid was the other part of the decision, the part where I'd decided to leave all my gear on the raft while I lined it through. After all, they were just minor rapids, they weren't dangerous, so why not leave everything right where it was. And I mean everything: food, rifle, fishing gear, ax. Everything. What an idiot I'd been to make that decision!

And for that reason, the other strong emotion I'd felt right then had been embarrassment. I'd asked myself how I would ever be able to explain to anyone what had just happened without looking like a complete idiot.

But fear? No, I hadn't felt afraid. Not at all, or at least not much. Not fear for my life, anyway, just fear of the hardships ahead, because though I'd thought my situation was serious, it hadn't seemed like anything I couldn't handle. It hadn't seemed life-threatening.

I still had my pocket knife and some matches and my compass, and though I'd lost my map, I knew exactly where I had to go in order to get back to civilization. I knew where I had to go, and I knew how to get there. I had to get back to the North Canol Road, and there were two ways to get there from here, one of them very dangerous and the other one long and difficult.

Because while the road wasn't very far away in miles, it was extremely far in reality given the fact that I was standing on the north bank of the river while the road was to the south. So that meant that my two choices were either to throw together some type of improvised raft and try to cross the river—an act that I knew would be suicidal—or to hike upriver the two hundred miles or so it would take to reach the place up near the border of the Northwest Territories where the road crossed the river. I'd known at the time that it would be a long, hard walk, but I'd never thought that I wouldn't make it. I'd just seen it as an inconvenience, not as a danger.

Floating down the river on a flimsy, makeshift raft and hoping that the current would eventually wash me over to the south bank? Yes, that would have been dangerous. But walking upriver? What danger could there be in that?

So I'd set off feeling stupid and embarrassed and angry at myself, but at the same time, I'd been full of self-confidence. Oh, how it hurt now to remember that feeling! That feeling that I wasn't really in trouble, that I could handle anything. Because that feeling seemed so very far away now. I'd lost it so completely.

And even more painfully, I was remembering my first evening in camp and the tremendous surge of self-confidence I'd felt at the time—the feeling of invincibility. It had seemed realistic right then because the walking had been so easy all day. All I'd had to do was to follow the game trail running along the bank of the river. And then when I'd stopped to make camp, I'd had a surprisingly easy time catching a grayling with a sort of fishing net I'd made out of berry vines tied to a pole. It hadn't taken me many tries at dipping and scooping with my net before I'd caught a fish, and then as I'd roasted it over the campfire and eaten it, I'd felt like I could conquer the world, or at least the wilderness. After all, I had two strong legs, and I had enough knowhow to catch fish at will, so what else did I need?

How little I'd suspected at the time that it would be days before I'd catch another fish, or that the spear I was whittling and hardening in the fire that evening would never do me any good. That I'd never be able to hit any of the small animals I'd later try to kill with it. And as I thought about my feelings of that evening, I felt a double-edged pain, a pain from recalling that early high and another pain from recalling how I had come slowly crashing back down to earth in the long days of hardship and privation that had followed.

Maybe I should just stop remembering altogether, forget about both the good and the bad. Maybe I should just open my eyes and get back to reality. But how could I when I knew that reality was far worse than any of my memories? If only I could remember other things that happened in other places back before I came to this river. If only I could escape to another time and place, however briefly it might be. But my mind seemed incapable of that. It seemed to have forgotten everything else and to remember only these last, awful days.

I tried to think back into the past, as far back as I could go, but all I saw was myself standing by that tree, with the end of the rope in my hand, psyching myself up for my moment of truth.

I couldn't stand it again! I had to open my eyes.

When I opened them, I saw the forest, the peaceful forest—the forest where I was going to die. Because while the forest was still just as serene and inviting as ever, my body was now a wreck. It was weak and emaciated. My two strong legs had lost so much strength that they might not even be able to hold my body upright any more, let alone being able to walk the many miles I still had to go to get out of here. And besides being weak, they were also battered and bruised and sprained and swollen. They were a mess. How could I ever walk out of this forest with those for legs?

I knew that in order to strengthen my legs, I needed energy. I needed nourishment. But I hadn't the strength left to make another fishing net, and even if I had, I was too weak and too discouraged to put it to use. So that meant that my only alternative was to search out edible plants.

I didn't know much about edible plants, and I'd made some bad choices in the past. I'd gotten very sick on a couple of occasions, and in fact, that was where an awful lot of my strength had gone. And since another round of vomiting and diarrhea right now would probably kill me, I knew I had to play it safe in what I ate.

I looked around at the plants nearby—at the plants within crawling distance—and the only things I saw that I knew were edible were a few young fireweed shoots. I crawled over and picked them and ate them, and though they still tasted as bad as ever, I found it very satisfying to get something into my stomach.

I let the fireweed digest for a couple of minutes, and then I felt strong enough to get to my feet. I stood up and swayed a little, and then I began hobbling and staggering along the game trail leading upriver.

I was amazed to find that I still had such a strong will to go on in spite of all the pain and suffering that went with it. I pushed myself on and on. I refused to stop except when I needed a drink of water from the river or when I saw more fireweed shoots or occasional ripe blackberries, and then I only stopped long enough to pick them and eat them before resuming my feeble progress along the trail.

How could I keep going? How could I keep fighting for life when I knew it was hopeless? Why didn't I just give up?

I asked myself those questions, and I also asked why it was that whenever I closed my eyes, I longed for death, but whenever they were open, the only thing I could think about was life. I longed for life, and I clung to life, and I refused to give up. I still had that spark, the spark of life, and I fought with all my might to keep it from going out.

When I came upon obstacles or dangers in the trail, I just plunged ahead and hoped for the best. I no longer had the strength to avoid them. It almost made me laugh to remember how cautious I'd been in the early days, how I'd made such efforts to avoid injuring my legs. I'd passed obstacles in ways that were ungraceful and even cowardly, but I'd done it in ways that would preserve my legs, the legs that would have to carry me out of this forest. But then as I'd lost strength, and especially after that first time I'd gotten sick, I'd become more and more reckless until now I just didn't care at all.

Sprains didn't worry me. I could keep going with sprained ankles and knees. The pain wasn't all that bad. And so far I'd been lucky when it came to breaking bones. All I had were sprains and strains and bruises, and I could live with all those.

The trail had become more and more difficult the farther I'd gone upriver, as the hills and ridges had become not only more numerous but also higher. And now as I came to the base of yet another high ridge, I was faced with another tough choice, another life-or-death decision.

Should I follow the trail and climb the ridge? That would mean leaving the river and having to go without water since I had no canteen or other container. The last few ridges I'd crossed had been long, hard, dry struggles. In fact, I almost hadn't made it over the last one. It had been a near thing. And now this ridge looked like it was even higher than that one had been. It looked higher and I felt weaker. It looked like death. It looked like the place where I would die if I decided to climb it.

But the only other choice left to me could be just as bad, the choice to follow the river, because the trail would probably be small and poor, maybe even non-existent in places. And then

there was a very good chance that sooner or later, I'd come to a place where it would become completely impassable.

So what should my choice be: the certain death of the ridge or the probable death of the river? Oh, what a choice to have to make! What a horrible decision. There was really no choice in the matter, though. I had to follow the river. I had to follow it and hope for the best.

I left the main game trail and took a smaller one that followed the river bank, but that trail soon disappeared altogether in an area of thick bush. I fought my way through the bush as best I could in my weak, battered condition. I fought and stumbled and fell and got up and fought some more. I finally made it through the bush and into a more open forest, but that didn't last long as I soon came to more thick bush—more bush and more bush, it seemed to go on forever.

When I reached a point where I absolutely couldn't go on another step, I flopped down onto the ground to take a rest. I didn't try to fight off the mosquitoes that attacked me where I lay. Why bother? I was used to them by now. I just sprawled out there and rested, and I soon drifted off to sleep.

It was funny how my daily pattern had changed so much, or rather had completely disappeared. Early on, I'd maintained a normal sequence of walking during the day and sleeping at night, but now I no longer knew or cared what time it was. Whenever I had the strength, I walked, and whenever I didn't, I slept. And of course, the lack of darkness at night up here in the north at this time of year made it possible for me to walk at almost any hour.

So now it was time for me to rest, and I closed my eyes and let myself go. And soon I was back there again, standing by that tree and getting ready for my moment of truth. I was standing there and then I was running and wrapping the rope around the next tree, and I was tying the rope off and getting ready to climb onto the raft which was now close enough to the bank for me to do so. But before I could get on, my dream switched over to other events: to accidents and hardships and suffering, and even to one or two brief moments of triumph. And then after reliving those other events, I found myself right back by the tree again, getting ready to start running once again.

The dream—or was it a memory?—kept coming back to me, and each time it ended at the exact same point, at the point where I was just about to get onto the raft. I kept dreaming it over and over again until one time when the pattern was suddenly broken, when it was interrupted by something new and different, something old and distant, something that called up distant memories. It was interrupted by the sound of human voices somewhere off in the distance.

I couldn't believe that I was hearing them after all these days, even weeks, of silence. I hadn't heard a voice in so long that I couldn't remember, and I hadn't even dreamed about one, either. All I'd dreamed about had been silence and solitude. It had been nothing but myself, lost and alone in the wilderness.

I knew that I should open my eyes and see if the voices were real or just a dream, but I didn't want to open them. Because opening them meant leaving my dreams and returning to the full horror of my reality. I didn't want to open them. I just wanted to die.

After a struggle, I opened my eyes and looked out at the river in time to see a canoe some distance off downriver. I yelled at the guys in the canoe as soon as I saw them, but my voice had no strength. I struggled to my feet and began waving my arms in spite of the fact that they had their backs to me, and I yelled for everything I had. I yelled for my life, and I yelled for an end to my suffering. I yelled and yelled, and I continued yelling even after they'd rounded a bend and disappeared from sight.

It was all over now. I knew it was. My salvation had just come and gone, and there wouldn't be another chance. Canoes were very rare on this river—in all this time, I'd only seen one go by before, and that was way back before I'd lost my raft—so the chances of another one coming by in the near future were next to nothing.

I stood and stared downriver, hoping that they'd turn around and come back. I stood and stared, and I wanted to cry even though I was way, way beyond crying. I was dead and gone, and the only thing left to do was to resign myself to my fate.

I felt like I was ready to die, but something inside me refused to give up. Something insisted on continuing to struggle along. Something, some spark, some spark of life that refused to let itself go out so easily.

I drank some water from the river and ate a few more fireweed shoots, and then I resumed hobbling along upriver. I fought my way through more patches of thick bush and I continued on, and though I fell many times as I went, each time I got back up and continued on. I wasn't ready to give up.

But then I came upon an obstacle that I couldn't overcome. I came to a spot where the river bank was cut off by the base of a sheer cliff. There was nowhere along the bank for me to continue walking as the cliff fell straight into the river, and there was no way for me to ever scale that high, steep cliff. There was nothing for me to do now but to turn back and take the other trail, the one that led over the ridge.

So I knew it was all over, but still I searched for some final hope, some desperate chance. Like maybe I could still throw together a raft of some sort and float away somewhere, float over to the south bank or down to where those guys in the canoe were camping tonight. Somewhere! I had to try something!

I searched for raft-building materials as I retraced my steps downriver, and after awhile, I came across a suitable log. It was big enough to carry me all by itself, which meant that all I had to do was to roll it into the river and get onto it and then hope for the best. That was all, just roll it into the river.

The log was big and heavy, and I was very weak, but still I was determined to find some way to get it into the river. I looked around until I found a branch that I could use as a lever, and then when that branch proved to be too small and weak for the job, I looked around for another. I stuck the end of my lever under the log, and I began to push. I didn't have much strength left, but I summoned all of it that I possibly could. I pushed and pushed, and then I moved the lever to a different spot and pushed some more. But no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't budge the log.

I pushed until I had nothing left, nothing at all, and then as I tried to sit down for a rest, I collapsed completely onto the ground. I lay there, too tired to move as I waited to get my strength back, though somehow I knew it would never return. I'd just used up my last reserves of strength on that log, and now it was really over. I was finished. I'd just used up my last chance and the spark had finally gone out.

I had to get some rest now, some real rest, so I closed my eyes. And soon I was dreaming again. I was standing by that tree and getting ready for my moment of truth. I was looking at the next tree along the bank, and I was looking at the end of the rope in my hands, and I was saying to myself, "Okay, Greywolf, this is it. You've gotta do it. You've gotta make it."

And I was unwrapping the rope from around the tree, and I was running, and I was feeling the raft pulling on the rope, and I was pulling back as hard as I could. I was running as fast as I could go, and I was reaching the tree, and I was wrapping the rope around it. Just in time! I had just enough rope left to do it.

I was looking at the raft and seeing that it was now close enough to the bank for me to get onto it, so I was tying the rope off to the tree and I was climbing aboard. And now I was on the raft, and I was reaching into my pocket and pulling out my pocket knife, and I was leaning over and cutting the rope and setting the raft free.

And now the raft was on its way, floating down the river with me aboard. I was floating away, floating off into a whole new territory, into another life and a future. I was floating off into forgetfulness, into oblivion.

## INDIAN CABIN

The man had finished his breakfast some time ago, but he was in no particular hurry to get up and get going. He felt comfortable lounging about in the old log cabin, the cabin which was always left furnished and ready for use by whoever might need it. He was enjoying himself lolling back on the bed this way, reading his book by the dusky light that snuck in through the small windows. He felt good, and he felt relaxed, and he told himself that maybe he should wait just a little bit longer before setting out on the long walk that lay ahead of him that day. Maybe he should read another chapter of the *Chuang Tzu* before starting his day's hike, another chapter or perhaps even two.

As he lay there, he could still feel the effects of the previous day's walk. He could feel the twenty miles he'd hiked from town out to this cabin, and the very thought of the twenty he still had to go before reaching his claim made him feel lazy and contented right where he was. Of course, it wasn't an especially difficult twenty miles that lay ahead of him, no more difficult than the twenty he'd already come since the whole route lay along an old abandoned mining road. But still, twenty miles was twenty miles. And at the same time, while his backpack wasn't especially heavy, it wasn't especially light, either, given the load of supplies from town that he was carrying with him.

He preferred not to face it just yet, though. He preferred to stay exactly where he was, with his body comfortably sprawled out on the hard old mattress and his mind wandering the dusty roads of ancient China. Or at least with a part of his mind in China, because in actuality, much of it was drifting in the near vicinity of sleep. So near, in fact, that when he heard the distinct sound of a car driving along the nearby mining road, he failed to respond. He failed to rouse himself, failed to jump up and run out to the road and flag the car down even though he knew that by doing so, he might be able to save himself twenty miles of walking. But he just couldn't do it at that moment since his lethargy was so overwhelming. And besides, he told himself, what with the sound being muffled by the thick walls of the cabin, and with the distance that lay between here and the road, the car would surely be long gone before he could ever get out there to stop it.

So he didn't respond. He didn't get up, and he didn't run out. Instead, he ignored it. He tuned all thoughts of the car right out of his mind and returned his attention to ancient China—to China and to his sleepiness. And it was because of this, because of his tuning it all back out, that he was taken so completely by surprise when the two men who had been riding in the car suddenly opened the door of the cabin and came walking inside.

Sam and Joseph hadn't been expecting to find anyone in the cabin since they hadn't seen a vehicle parked outside, so they were taken just as much by surprise as the man was at this abrupt and unannounced gathering. Earlier that morning, they had decided to go out for a drive—to go hunting as they called it, though what they were actually doing was scouting out an area where they hadn't been for some time, driving along one of the old mining roads leading out of town and seeing what there was to see. And when they'd decided to stop and check on the condition of the deserted-looking cabin, the last thing they'd expected to find inside had been a man, and a white man at that.

They were both taken aback, but Sam quickly recovered his voice as he said to his companion, “Hey, look at that. There’s a white man in here.”

“Yeah, you’re right. There sure is,” Joseph went along.

“A white man who got no car. I wonder what he’s doin’ here,” Sam continued.

“I don’t know...”

“Hey white man, what you doin’ in here?” Sam asked him bluntly. It wasn’t his way to be meek or polite in a situation like this.

The white man’s sleepiness was gone in a second what with the way this big, tough-looking guy who loomed over him was coming after him so directly. And since he couldn’t tell by the tone of voice whether the guy was joking or whether he was serious, the white man responded tentatively, “Hi there, how ya doin’?”

“Ya know you’re not supposed to be in here, don’t ya? There’s no white men allowed in this cabin.”

“No?” The white man still spoke tentatively, though his voice was beginning to harden. Because as he looked over his situation and saw just how isolated he was out here in this cabin, along with the fact that these Native guys had him out-numbered two-to-one, his adrenal energy was beginning to flow, and his defensive instincts were quickly taking over.

But since the white man still showed no obvious signs of his inward stiffening, Sam went on in the same tone that he’d just been using, in the half-playful, half-aggressive tone that he so often employed. “So what you doin’ in here, white man?”

“Just sittin’ here,” the white man mumbled out in a harder voice still.

It was always Sam’s way to test people upon first meeting them, to prick at them and provoke them and see how they reacted, and so that was exactly what he proceeded to do with this white man. And as he did so, he still seemed unaware of the fact that his probes were being taken very badly by the other guy. “Yeah, you’re in big trouble, man. You gotta get outa here right away.”

The white man didn’t answer this latest statement, but instead he sat in stony silence as his guts grew ever tighter. And Joseph, who was perhaps even more oblivious than Sam to the white man’s reactions, decided after an awkward pause that maybe he should join in and take a part in the unfunny game that was being played. “You sure do gotta get outa here, man. And like now you gotta pay a fine or somethin’ like that.”

“Yeah, you gotta pay a fine, and you gotta pay it to us!” Sam’s voice was starting to lose its playful edge as he reacted to the grim, defiant look that had come over the white man’s face. He didn’t like that look. He didn’t like that silent stare, but instead of backing off when he saw it, he decided to up the ante even further. He decided to push his little game on to the next level.



“Ya know you gotta get out for real. You can’t use this cabin. It’s a Indian cabin. It’s for Indians only, and you ain’t no Indian.”

As the guy began to “go Indian” on him, the white man’s silence grew even more profound. Because he knew what it meant when one of these Yukon Native guys began calling himself an Indian right in front of a white man. It meant exactly the same thing as when a black man referred to himself as a nigger in front of a white: it meant that he was looking for a fight. And so instead of answering him, the white man just stared back and bided his time. And at the same time, he did what he could to furtively glance about and survey his situation, to weigh his options, and especially his options for fighting his way out of here. Because it seemed clear to him by now that a physical confrontation—a two-on-one out here in this isolated cabin—was growing ever more inevitable.

Sam was becoming angrier and angrier at the white man’s silence, but now whenever he spoke to the guy and repeated his statement that the cabin was for Indians only, the guy’s silence just seemed to deepen. So finally out of frustration, Sam decided to ignore the white man and to speak with Joseph instead, since Joseph was the only guy here who was willing to play along with him. “Oh, these white men, they got no respect for us Indians, do they? They take everything, man. Everything we got.”

“Yeah, you sure got it right there.”

“They take the whole goddamn country, man. They take it all.”

“And I bet they think they gonna take this cabin, too, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s right. That’s fuckin’ right. They think they can come in and take this cabin if they want to. Like this white man right here, he thinks he can just take it. That’s what he thinks.”

“But he’s wrong, man.”

“Fuckin’ right he’s wrong.” Sam was working himself up into a rage, and now he decided that the time had come to go directly after the silent white man once again. “You think you gonna take this cabin, huh? Is that what you think? Don’t you know this is a Indian cabin?”

“I didn’t see no fuckin’ sign!” the white man finally spoke, and he did so in his coldest, meanest voice.

“No sign? You didn’t see no sign? Course there’s a sign. There’s a Indian sign. A sign says no white men.” And then after a dramatic pause, Sam put his hand on his chest and said, “It says it right here!”

Now, people who knew Sam knew not to take him too seriously when he acted like this. They knew it was just his way to provoke people. And since he lived in such a tiny town where he seldom met people who didn’t already know him, he was used to having them laugh it off as a joke or even having them tease him back. But what he wasn’t used to was having someone take his put-on aggression as seriously as this white man seemed to be taking it. And so as he stood

and stared down upon the white man, he felt like he was entering into a whole new and unexplored territory. Like he was entering into a situation in which he'd never been before, one in which he might finally have to come face-to-face with the reality behind this aggression of his. A situation in which he might finally be forced to discover whether his aggression was really a game, like he'd always believed it to be, or whether there was actually something solid behind it.

And while Sam was entertaining these first serious doubts ever about his own intentions, the white man was also asking questions of himself. He was asking himself how he could possibly have become so complacent sitting here in this cabin as to be caught completely off-guard in this way. How could he have so totally abandoned the extreme vigilance he usually maintained when out in the bush alone? Had it been because of the false sense of security that came from these cabin walls? Had that been what had made him forget all about the dangers that lay outside those walls?

Sam finally grew tired of the staring contest he found himself being drawn into, and he decided to speak with Joseph once again. This white man was too quiet and too hard, and he needed to lighten things up a little bit. He needed to talk to someone who would answer him and play along with him, someone who had a sense of humor. Because this other guy, this white man, he had no sense of humor at all.

So Sam and Joseph stood and talked, and they complained about all the injustices that had been perpetrated upon their race by the whites, and about all the future injustices that seemed sure to follow, too. And during all the time they talked, the white man sat in absolute silence, not moving a muscle and not taking his eyes off Sam even for a second. He sat and stared, and he worked over plans in his head, plans for getting himself out of this situation, and plans for getting his hands onto the loaded rifle he'd left propped up against the wall just inside the door. The rifle which now lay so far beyond his reach, leaning as it was against the wall all the way behind the two Native men. Because if he could just get to it when they weren't expecting him...

There was something about the attention the white man was paying to the rifle that finally caught Joseph's attention and drew him to it. When he turned and saw it, though, he quickly turned back since the sight of that rifle so clearly represented an escalation in hostilities, an escalation that he wanted to avoid. So he turned back toward Sam, though unfortunately he didn't do so rapidly or stealthily enough to keep from drawing Sam's attention over to the rifle as well. And no sooner had Sam seen it sitting there against the wall than he went over and picked it up and began to examine it, "Winchester, Model 94, huh? Good gun. Good for huntin'."

As Sam turned the rifle over in his hands and looked at it, the white man tightened up rock hard and leaned slightly forward, ready to spring at any second should the guy act like he was about to point it at him. He was ready to jump, ready to respond, and he swore to himself that he wouldn't let this guy take his intimidation a single step further. It had gone just as far as it was going to go. So he prepared for action while at the same time kicking himself for not having acted earlier, for not having jumped up and grabbed the gun and chased these guys out of here before this, at some moment when they'd least expected it. Because now that the big, loud-mouthed guy had the gun in his hands, he knew that the element of surprise was long gone.

For his part, Sam still had no clear idea of what he wanted to do. The only thing he knew for sure was that he didn't want to shoot the guy. But did he want to keep provoking him? Did he want to intimidate him a little now that he was holding the gun? Did he want to keep pushing the situation? He didn't know. He really couldn't say. He just knew that he wanted to talk some more. He wanted to say things to this white man, and most of all, he wanted the white man to answer him.

"You ever shoot anything with it? You ever shoot moose?" and he paused for a moment, giving the white man a chance to speak. But the man said nothing. "You ever shoot Indians? I hear it's good for shootin' Indians. Real good. And like maybe it's good for shootin' white men, too. Ya think?"

Joseph was becoming alarmed at the turn the conversation was now taking, and for the first time in his life, he was beginning to have his doubts about Sam. He was beginning to worry about just how far he might be willing to push this hostility thing of his. He was beginning to worry that between Sam's stubborn attempts at provocation and this white man's stubborn refusal to react, this situation could be on the verge of spiraling completely out of control. And since he was the only one present who could act as a peacemaker between the two of them, he knew it was up to him to do what he could to break the spiral. It was up to him to change the subject.

"Hey man, we never did introduce ourselves, did we? So like, uh, my name's Joseph, and this big hard-ass is Sam."

The white man didn't say a word in reply, though he nodded his head slightly in a sort of greeting.

"We're from Carmacks, just goin' huntin' out here, goin' up toward Nansen... That where you're goin'?"

And the white man nodded his head once again, this time in a more pronounced way.

"You goin' prospectin' up there, or you got a claim? Is that why you're goin' there?"

"Yeah, I got a claim." The white man finally spoke, and not in a hostile tone, either.

"Oh yeah, up there on them upper creeks? That where you're goin'?" and he paused as the white man replied with yet another nod. "Say man, I forgot to ask you what your name is, didn't I? So what is it? What's your name?"

"It's Greywolf," the white man responded.

"Greywolf?..." Joseph was surprised at the name.

"Greywolf!" Sam cut in. "That sounds like a Indian name. Where the hell'd you get a name like that, white man? Where'd you get a Indian name?"

“It’s just my name, that’s all,” said Greywolf, and his tone hardened once again as he addressed Sam.

“That’s a Indian name, man. I never hearda nothin’ like that...”

“Yeah, it’s funny, ain’t it?” Joseph added, trying to encourage Sam in what seemed like a lightening up of his attitude.

“This white man, he’s got a Indian name, and look at us, we both got white man’s names. Now, that’s awful damn funny, ain’t it?”

“Yeah man, it sure...”

But before Joseph could even finish his sentence, Greywolf had sprung into action. He’d seen his opportunity arise—his one last opportunity to take them by surprise—and he’d taken it. He’d jumped up without warning and wrenched the rifle out of Sam’s startled hands, and then he’d taken a step or two backward while working a bullet into the chamber of the gun. And he’d done it all so quickly that the two of them never even knew what hit them.

Joseph was shocked into instant silence by the sudden onslaught, and Sam stood gaping open-mouthed, unable to believe what had just happened. And as for Greywolf, he felt a great surge of confidence as he stood there in control of things for the first time, though he was already starting to regret the way he’d worked the lever of the gun after grabbing it since it represented a far more confrontational act that the situation really called for. But after all, it had been nothing more than an automatic reaction on his part, an unconscious release of some of the tension he’d just been holding inside. And at least now as he stood there with the cocked rifle in his hands, he had the presence of mind to point it away from the two men.

Greywolf was the one who finally broke the tense silence that followed, speaking up in a calm, even casual voice, “Hey, ya know what? It was really great meetin’ you guys and all that, but right now, I gotta get goin’.”

“Hey man, we didn’t mean nothin’ by any of this,” Joseph began to plead with him.

“Oh yeah, I know that. I know it was nothin’... But like I said, I gotta get goin’.”

“Yeah, sure. Go ahead... But hey, man, no hard feelings, right?”

“Nah, no problem at all. Don’t worry about it.”

“Cause we didn’t mean nothin’...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Greywolf had already heard enough of Joseph’s groveling, so he changed the subject. “Hey, I tell you what. I got my hands full right now, so I’d really appreciate it if you guys could do me a favor and pack up my gear for me, okay?”

“Yeah sure, anything you want,” said Joseph as he set about gathering up Greywolf’s gear and stuffing it into the backpack. And he continued to speak and to apologize over and over

again as he went about the task. And during the whole time he did it, Sam stood back, strong and silent for the first time in his life.

When the backpack was loaded and ready to go, Greywolf hoisted it onto his back and then headed toward the door as the others made way for him to pass. And it wasn't until he was just stepping out the door that Sam finally spoke up and said to him, "Hey man, it was just a joke. That's all it was." And as he said it, he really and truly believed it.

"Yeah, I know. You were just playin' around. So there's no hard feelings, okay?" And Greywolf, too, was sincere when he said it. Then after he'd gone a few steps from the cabin, he turned and called back to the two of them, "Hey, good luck with your huntin', you guys."

"Yeah, you too," Sam answered him, and Joseph chimed in with a similar sentiment.

Arriving at a place he felt to be a safe distance from the cabin, Greywolf stopped to work the bullets out of his rifle and then reload the magazine while leaving the chamber empty. And once he'd finished doing that, he continued on his way toward his claim. He resumed his march up the dirt road, taking one step after another after another, with each step eating up a little bit of the twenty miles he had to go. The twenty miles he would have to walk if no cars happened to come along this road today. Though he'd only gone about a mile, maybe two, when he began to hear a car approaching him from behind, and once the sound grew loud enough to where he knew the vehicle would soon be coming into sight, he stopped and turned to see just who it might be. But sure enough when it made its appearance, it turned out to be the pickup truck with his two recent acquaintances inside. And so as he stood and watched it come nearer, he moved back off the road to let it go by, making no gesture of any type toward it and no sign of recognition. Doing nothing at all but standing back and watching.

Now, normally in a situation like this, Sam would swerve the truck over and pretend like he was trying to run the person down. But given all that had just transpired between him and this white man, he knew that would be a very bad idea. He knew he should just keep on driving and forget all about the jokes. And so it was that he drove right past the guy like he wasn't even there. He just kept on going. But then all at once, after having gone a short distance further up the road, he decided that maybe he should go ahead and stop the truck after all.

Greywolf saw the truck stop, and he immediately raised his level of alert, pulling his rifle up toward the ready position with his hand near the lever but not on it. And standing in that way, he waited to see what exactly the two of them were up to.

Sam opened the door on the driver's side and stepped halfway out of the truck, and then he yelled to Greywolf back down the road, "Hey man, you want a ride?" He'd finally decided that this white man was okay after all. He wasn't the type to back down, and even more importantly, he wasn't the type to make the other guy back down, either.

"Sure! Sounds great!" Greywolf yelled back as he jogged up to the truck and climbed into the back. And as he did so, he told himself that maybe these guys were okay after all. Maybe they really were harmless, though just to be on the safe side, he'd make sure that he kept his rifle handy as long as they were around.

# THE LEGEND OF BILLY WALKER

Greywolf blew into town in a stolen car driven by some crazy runaway kid from Kansas. But Greywolf wasn't the thief; he was only a hitchhiker. It was the kid who had stolen the car. And of course, being a kid and having no common sense, he hadn't stolen any type of normal, discrete car, but instead he'd stolen some hopped-up muscle car complete with racing stripe. The perfect car for calling attention to yourself.

A little earlier, the kid had picked Greywolf up just off the main highway and, saying that he wasn't going anywhere in particular, he'd agreed to drive him out the twisty little mountain road that dead ended at this town. The kid had sped along the road, barely making some of the curves, but at the same time talking with a shyness and deference almost completely at odds with his driving. And now as they approached the town, Greywolf was able to relax—it looked like he'd survive the trip after all—and turn his attention to locating his old friend Eric whose presence here was the reason for his visit. But there was one little problem with this, which was the fact that Greywolf had never been here before, and so he had no idea where Eric lived.

They soon saw a young guy walking along the road just outside of town, and Greywolf told the kid to pull over. Then he leaned out the window and asked the guy about Eric, and the response was that sure he knew who Eric was, but he didn't know where he lived. He said that the best way to find him would be to go ask around at the Palace Saloon, the big, fancy place right in the middle of town. Greywolf thanked him for the information and then told the kid to get going, but as they drove away, he couldn't help thinking about the way that guy had just looked at him. There had been something funny about it, about the expression on his face, because it was almost like he'd been gazing at Greywolf with a gaze of admiration, thinking, "You must be really cool," or something to that effect. And now Greywolf was asking himself what could possibly have inspired that look. Had it been the car? Or had it been the fact that he was a friend of Eric's? What could it have been?

Minutes later they found themselves driving down Main Street of a very authentic looking old western mining town, complete with false fronts and covered wooden sidewalks, a town that could have passed for the set of a western movie if only it hadn't been for the cars along the street. And as he looked at the quaint, well-preserved little town, Greywolf was reminded of the town where Eric grew up. Or at least of the way that town used to be many years ago, back before they built the freeway that runs right by it, before it was invaded and developed and ruined. So now it appeared that Eric had come home to this place.

They quickly spotted the Palace Saloon, the crown jewel of the small downtown core, and the kid pulled over and parked across from it. Greywolf started to thank him for the ride and gather up his bedroll, but the kid hesitated a bit and then asked him if it would be okay to hang around for awhile. Greywolf said, yeah why not. But one thing, the kid would have to wait in the car since he was obviously way too young to go into a bar.

As Greywolf approached the place, he could see through the swinging doors that the interior was just as impressive as the exterior, if not more so, with fancy chandeliers hanging down and with ornate mirrors and classic saloon paintings lining the walls. And as he drew nearer and nearer, he became more and more enchanted with the place until finally he pushed the

doors open and thereby broke the spell. Because rather than finding a crowd of tough-looking cowboys and gold-miners inside, what he found instead was a bunch of tourists and other typical modern types.

As he surveyed the crowd, he told himself that it was a good thing the kid was hanging around since it would have been very awkward to have walked into a place like this, in front of a clientele like this, with a bedroll slung over your shoulder. As it was, though, he only felt slightly out of place, not enough so to prevent him from striding directly up to the bar and asking the bartender if he knew where Eric might be.

“Are you a friend of his?” asked the big guy in the fancy cowboy shirt.

“Yeah, an old friend. I’ve known him for years.” And as he said it, he noticed an expression come over the bartender’s face, an expression similar to the one that he’d seen on the last guy he’d asked about Eric. And not only that, but as he looked around, he saw the same admiring look in the eyes of a couple of the other people nearest to him at the bar. What could this be all about? he wondered.

“Oh, he’s not here right now. He’ll probably be in later.”

Next, Greywolf asked where he lived, but the bartender said that he didn’t know, and this was followed by a short silence which lasted until one of the other guys at the bar came to his aid. The guy said that he knew where Eric lived, where Eric and his girlfriend lived, and then he proceeded to give directions. Greywolf listened and repeated the directions, and then he thanked the guy, and he thanked the Bartender, and he nodded to one and all at the bar before he went back outside.

As he returned to the kid at the car, Greywolf knew that he was going to have to send him on his way. Because if Eric was living with a woman, it would be hard enough showing up by himself and asking for a place to crash, but to show up with someone else? With a stranger? And especially with some crazy kid who would probably end up ripping off the place? No, there was no way. He was going to have to tell the kid goodbye.

He tried to break it to the kid as gently as he could, saying that his friend’s place was too small for him to stay there, and the kid seemed to take it pretty well. He was probably used to rejection as all he did was give a hang-dog look and then say, okay, I’ll be going. Greywolf felt sorry for him as he gathered up his bedroll, and he shook the kid’s hand with real feeling and wished him luck, lots and lots of luck. And then he stood back as the kid tore out, speeding off to who-knows-what adventures and misadventures and prison sentences.

Greywolf soon located Eric’s house a block off Main Street and still within the old town core, and he knocked on the door. Eric answered and, after making an exclamation of surprise, he quickly grabbed Greywolf’s hand and shook it and threw his other arm around Greywolf’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Geez, it’s good to see you again. I didn’t know you were in town. Come on in.” And so on.

Eric was still as impressive looking as always—big and muscular and handsome—and he still exuded the same air of easy, unforced masculinity. He led Greywolf inside, calling out to his

girlfriend Kim who soon entered the room and said hello. And as he introduced the two of them, Greywolf was struck by how beautiful she was, how truly beautiful. Why, she was even better looking than Eric.

Both of them said that there would be no problem. Greywolf could crash there as long as he wanted. There was plenty of room. And they said to go ahead and stash the sleeping-bag by the sofa.

Eric and Greywolf began to talk about what they had each been up to lately when Kim asked Greywolf if he'd like a beer. But then before he could even answer, Eric suggested that they head down to the Palace to continue the conversation. Greywolf gave his ascent, and Kim said that she'd like to go along, too, since this was a chance to get to know one of Eric's oldest friends.

When the three of them entered the bar, they were immediately greeted by a number of people there, including the guy who'd given directions to Eric's house a little while earlier. But one peculiar thing that Greywolf noticed about the greetings was that nearly all of them seemed to have a certain air of deference to them. It was almost like they were greeting some sort of local hero or, at least in the case of the men, like they were greeting the alpha male of their little social group.

Eric introduced Greywolf to two or three people as they sat down at the bar, and then he ordered three draw beers—not draft beers. And as they sat there and drank them, Eric and Greywolf began to talk about old times, about old places and old friends and old adventures. The two of them talked and Kim listened as did a number of other people at the bar. Greywolf found it uncomfortable at first, but as it didn't seem to bother Eric to have them listening in, he did his best to ignore the audience.

When they finished their beers, Greywolf ordered a round—a round of draw beers—which was to be the second of many rounds to come. And as the conversation continued, it turned to other subjects and thereby allowed Kim to enter into the discussion, Kim and a couple of others, too, who entered in as though they'd been part of the conversation right from the start. Eventually, Greywolf asked Kim if there was any local news worth talking about and, to his surprise, she answered with an emphatic yes and then went on to vent about the problems being caused around town by some local low-life by the name of Walker.

And as soon as the name came up, other people were joining in on the attack, making accusations against him and spewing venom in a way that piqued Greywolf's interest. He asked Kim to tell him more, and she was glad to oblige, as were the others who kept chiming in one after another with their own opinions and comments about his wrong-doings. This went on until finally, just about everyone at the bar had joined in except for a few tourists way down at the end. It seemed that everybody in the whole town hated him—everybody that is except Eric who for some reason remained, if not silent, at least non-committal on the subject.

Greywolf wanted to learn all he could about the guy, so he encouraged Kim and the others to go on and on about him while he formed a picture in his head. And quite a picture it was, too, a picture of an all-around bad guy, a picture of some sort of modern day desperado.



Because to begin with, Walker never worked. He never held a job, but instead he made his living through a combination of petty thievery and game poaching with a bit of illegal logging thrown in for good measure. It had gotten so bad that all the local store owners hated him and they always suspected him whenever one of their stores was broken into at night or whenever anything disappeared. And although up until that moment, they hadn't actually been able to catch him or to prove anything against him, they all knew it was him.

And as far as the poaching was concerned, everyone in the bar was certain that it was his main source of income. They said that he sold the furs and even some hides on the black market, furs that he had illegally—and very cruelly—trapped. And they claimed that they'd also heard about him selling venison and elk to some of the town's other lowlifes. Kim and everyone else seemed to be convinced about his poaching. But then when Greywolf tried to pin them down on the specifics, he found that not one of them had ever actually seen the furs or the meat or even any of his traps, though several of them claimed to know someone who had, or to know someone who knew someone who had.

And in any case, there were other charges against him besides that. Like there was the fact that he was a racist who repeatedly insulted the town's few black residents right to their faces, calling them niggers and everything else you could think of. Or at least they'd all heard stories about his racism, though once again when Greywolf tried to pin them down on specifics, he found that not one of them had ever actually witnessed him making his insults. But what did that really matter? Because even though they hadn't heard the insults, they'd all seen the big confederate flag patch that he wore on his coat. So what more proof did anyone need of his racism than that?

And besides, there was another charge against him to which several of them could testify from personal experience. That was the charge that he often harassed and even threatened hikers who wandered off the main trail outside town and got a little too close to the old gold mine that he owned and operated out there. Or at least the mine that he used to own up until recently when he'd been evicted from it. There were several people present in the bar who claimed to have had run-ins with him on the trails, and there was even one guy who claimed that Walker had threatened him with a gun.

They said that many people had complained about him over the years, both locals and tourists, but their complaints had never gone anywhere. And that was all because of the county sheriff, some pot-bellied old relic, some old-timer who knew nothing about the modern world and modern society. On top of which he was an old family friend of Walker's father and grandfather, which should give you some idea of just how helpful he'd been. Because whenever a complaint had reached him about Walker harassing people, his response had always been that the person should have stayed off private property and then there wouldn't have been any problems. That was it. He would blame it on the victim. And since he had that type of attitude toward the harassment and the threats, you can just imagine how deaf he'd been to complaints about the mine being an eyesore and an ecological blight. And that's not to mention the complaints about the fact that it never actually produced any gold but rather served as nothing more than a cover for Walker's various illegal activities.

The sheriff had been useless. He'd always just insisted that Walker had a legal claim to the mine and that was it. End of story. His hands were tied. But then just when things were looking their worst, a savior had suddenly appeared. A lawyer—or actually a former lawyer—had moved to town, and he'd soon come up with a solution. He'd come up with a way of dealing with Walker and the other miners, a way of evicting them from their mines.

The lawyer, whose real name was only known as a set of initials followed by some big long last name that no one was quite sure how to pronounce, was known around town as Scott. He had been some big-time lawyer back east until he'd quit and moved out to the west a couple of years ago and set up a kind of small-town legal aid office. And during the short time he'd been here, he had become quite a local hero because of the way he'd cleaned the place up. Why, he was maybe even a bigger hero than Eric judging by the way people gushed about him, and especially by the way that Kim gushed.

She very clearly admired the guy, and Greywolf wanted to share in that admiration, too. Because after all, she was quite a woman, not only beautiful to look at but also a beautiful person: intelligent and highly aware and progressive in all things. Why, she was almost too good for a guy like Eric. So anyway, when a woman like that looked at Greywolf with her big blue eyes and said something complimentary about someone, he was inclined to believe her. But somehow that wasn't quite the case with Scott, and Greywolf didn't know why that was. Maybe it was his prejudice against eastern lawyers, or maybe it was the sour expressions that appeared on Eric's face each time that Scott's name was mentioned.

Meanwhile, the conversation continued, and Greywolf pressed Kim to tell him the whole story of Scott's campaign to clean up the town, to tell it to him from the beginning, leaving out nothing. And in this, she was only too glad to oblige. So starting at the beginning, she told him how initially, the campaign hadn't been aimed exclusively at Walker, but rather it had been directed against a number of people who had been destroying the local ecology by running small gold mining operations in the mountains outside of town. Well, no sooner had Scott arrived in town than he'd set out to shut them down through a series of lawsuits and threatened lawsuits and other maneuvers. And his campaign had been very successful as they'd all shut down and left town one after the other. All of them, that is, except Walker who refused to give up and who somehow managed to hold on and on.

As Kim and the others praised Scott's campaign and its effects upon the town, they also referred to his larger vision for the town and for the region, a vision which they all seemed to share. It was a vision of an economy based on tourism, but not just any tourism. Rather it was based on an exclusive tourism, on an early form of eco-tourism, where people were attracted to the town because of the access it afforded to this section of the Rocky Mountains and its hundreds of miles of spectacular hiking and cross-country skiing trails. Because of the access it afforded to some of the most beautiful and unspoiled parts of the entire mountain range. And not only were the mountains wonderful, but the town itself was a jewel, a quaint little town with a great, authentic western air, and one that was so remote and isolated and so little known that it would never attract any sort of mass tourism. But instead, it would serve as the perfect jumping-off point for a mountain wilderness experience the likes of which couldn't be found anywhere else.

So obviously, there was no room for gold mining in this vision. The days of mining around here were over, they were dead and gone. And the sort of scenic and ecological destruction that mining caused had no place in this vision. In fact, any continued mining would do more to hurt the economy and the future of the town than it would to help.

Greywolf listened and, the more clearly he saw what this vision was and how widely it was shared by the people at the bar, the more clearly he began to see what exactly it was about these people that had struck him as so odd and out of place ever since he'd first entered the Palace. Because while they didn't exactly look or act like your typical small-town westerners, now he could see that they didn't think like them either. And maybe that was because they weren't small-town westerners. Maybe that was because they were all people who had made their fortunes elsewhere and then come here to get away from it all, the way that Scott had, or else they were people who now made their livings off the tourist economy that Scott's vision promoted. Maybe that was why they seemed so out of place: because none of them were really from around here at all. Because all of them were come-heres.

Anyway, Greywolf wanted to hear the rest of the story, so he pressed Kim to go on, which she did. She told him how Walker had refused to leave his mine in spite of all the pressure that Scott had applied, and how he'd grown increasingly hostile to the hikers who wandered a little too close to his mine. How he'd threatened them and called them names, and how he'd even pulled a gun on more than one of them who had tried to argue with him.

So something had to be done about Walker, and it had to be done right away. But the problem was that no one had been able to figure out just what to do. The sheriff wouldn't do anything about the threats, and Walker always seemed to stay just inside the letter of the mining laws, so that Scott hadn't been able to come up with a good reason for shutting him down. And it certainly wasn't that Scott hadn't tried. He had. But he just hadn't been able to shut the guy down.

Or that is not until one day when he'd finally come up with an idea that just might work. And so he'd taken his idea, and he'd laid his plans, and he'd waited for a day when he knew that Walker would be in town, and then he'd gone out to the mine to take pictures and gather evidence and look for some sort of violation. And after a lot of looking and a lot of studying the evidence, he'd finally found something that he could use, something based on some obscure regulation in the health code. But whatever the violation might have been, it had proven to be enough to convince a friendly judge at the county seat to issue an eviction notice.

And so that was it, he'd finally come up with a way to get rid of Walker, and he'd even convinced some foolhardy type to go out to Walker's mine and post the notice stating that the property was condemned. And with that the battle was won, or at least it should have been won if only Walker had done his part and admitted defeat and left. But that's not what he'd done at all and so, rather than this being the final victory, it had actually proven to be nothing more than the beginning of a whole new phase in the struggle. Because Walker had simply refused to honor the eviction notice and, if anything, he'd become an even bigger problem than he'd been before. He'd become even more aggressive in his harassment of the hikers who passed his way, and he'd even expanded the area within which he would harass them.

Scott had lodged more complaints with the sheriff's office, and he'd demanded action, but once again the sheriff had ignored the complaints and told him that there was nothing he could do about it, or at least not until he saw a restraining order against the guy. And though in taking that attitude, he was clearly flaunting the law in order to help out an old family friend, that was just the way the law worked out here in these rural counties.

So Scott had been forced to go back to the judge and get a restraining order. But at this point, he'd found himself faced with an even bigger problem, the problem of trying to serve the order. Because Walker knew by now not to let anyone give him any papers, so that each person who had tried to serve him had either been unable to locate him or else had found himself staring down the barrel of Walker's gun.

And it was here that things stood at the time when Greywolf came to town. Scott had been trying for weeks or even months to get the guy served, but he'd been unable to do so, and so the situation had reached something of a stalemate.

But in spite of his failure to finish off Walker, Scott was still very much looked up to by the people Greywolf had been listening to. And so there was a bit of a sensation when Scott himself walked into the bar a little later on that evening accompanied by a small entourage of the volunteers who had been helping him in his campaign to clean up the town. The greeting was something like the one that Eric had received, perhaps even more enthusiastic on the part of some, though Eric himself only gave a slight nod of the head when he and Scott made eye contact.

Greywolf was getting pretty drunk by this time, and at first he felt himself being carried along by the others to some extent, though the more time he had to look Scott over, the less impressed he was by him. Because sure, he was handsome and athletic—he cut a dashing figure in his western shirt and jeans—but still there was something unconvincing about him. And though Greywolf couldn't be sure of just what that something was, he knew he had a feeling about the guy, a feeling of doubt.

Scott and his friends sat down and drank draw beers and talked, and they gradually drew the attention of the crowd at the bar away from Eric and over to themselves. Eric had begun to get restless as soon as they'd come in, and it wasn't long before he suggested that they call it a night. His suggestion was rejected by Kim, however, as she said that she wanted to stick around and find out if there was any news or anything. And so they stayed but, with Eric growing more restless all the time, Kim finally gave in and agreed that they should leave. After all, they'd already had enough to drink, they'd had more than enough to drink, so now was a good time for them to call it quits.

The next morning, Kim and Greywolf were still sleeping off their hangovers when Eric, who was more accustomed to heavy drinking than either of them, went out and made the rounds of the town. And it wasn't long before he returned to wake them both up saying that he had a hot piece of local news, a very hot piece of news. He told them that there had been a break in the Walker case that very morning, but then when they pressed him for details, he said that he wouldn't tell them anything unless they got up and went with him down to Scott's office. Because that was where the action was. And so with that inducement, Kim and Greywolf did as

they were told. They got up and got dressed and they left the house, and then at that point, Eric filled them in on the morning's events.

He said that Walker had been in town that morning, the first time he'd been seen around there since Scott and his friends had begun trying to serve him with the restraining order. And not only had he been in town, but he had actually been to Scott's office. He had walked right into the office and right up to Scott's desk, and then he'd tossed a piece of paper onto the desk and said something like, "Here you go, you been served." And then he'd just walked back out before Scott had even had time to react. And according to the story that Eric had heard, the paper he'd left had been a note that said something to the effect of, "Leave me alone." Just that and nothing more.

Well, as was to be expected, Scott was furious about the incident, furious about the insolence, and word was rapidly spreading throughout the town that he was going to do something about it. Something big, something effective, though nobody knew quite what that something was going to be. In any case, the place to be right now was Scott's office, and as Eric and Kim and Greywolf approached it, they saw that a crowd was already starting to gather in the street outside. Greywolf recognized some of the people from the night before, and he was introduced to a couple of others by Eric and Kim who both began milling around in the crowd sharing gossip and rumors.

The crowd continued to grow as a large cross-section of the town seemed to be assembling, a cross-section that rather conspicuously didn't include any sheriff's deputies. And it was a calm crowd although an expectant one, a crowd that acted more like an audience expecting a show than an enraged citizenry.

It was some time before Scott appeared and, as soon as he did, the crowd fell silent and turned its attention toward him. He stood and hesitated for a moment, looking out at the crowd with a serious expression on his face, and then he began to speak in a voice that quickly grew in dramatic power. "I guess you all heard what happened a little while ago." He paused while the crowd mumbled its affirmation. "Well, what I have to say is that we can't stand for things like that. We just can't stand for them, not at all. Because they're an insult! That's right, an insult. An insult to all of us. Because Walker's stunt wasn't just an insult to me. Believe me it wasn't. It was an insult to the entire town! That's right, it was an insult to each and every one of us who live here. It was an insult to each and every one of you! An insult to all of us here in this town that he would ever think that he could get away with doing something like that.

"And what I'm here to tell you right now is that he's wrong. He's dead wrong. He can't get away with it, and we'll show him that he can't." He paused here for a response from the crowd, but all he got were a few isolated exclamations of support.

"And do you know how we're gonna show him that he can't get away with it? We're gonna do it by serving him with that restraining order once and for all. That's what we're gonna do. We're gonna go out there and serve him with it today! This very day! And then once we do, Sheriff Jones will have to get off his big, fat ass and arrest Walker. So that's what we're gonna do. We're gonna serve him, and we're gonna serve him today!" There was a titter of laughter

from the crowd over the reference to the sheriff's fat ass, a sign that they were starting to come around to his side, and his final declaration was greeted by a growing affirmative hum.

"So what we need right now is for all of you who know the woods around here to take copies of this order. And with these copies, you've gotta chase him down and serve him. Not tomorrow and not next week but now! Today! We need for you to go out there and get him. And don't worry, I have plenty of copies of the order. There are more than enough to go around. And all we have to do is serve him with one of them. That's it, just one and it's all over for him. He's finished!! We can do that, can't we?" As he paused, a number of people voiced their agreement.

"So who wants a copy? Who's ready to go out there and get Walker?" This question, unlike the previous one, was greeted with silence and hesitation as no one seemed ready to be the first to commit himself to the project. "Eric, how about you? You know the trails around here better than anybody. Will you take a copy?"

Eric seemed very taken aback at being singled out in this way, and he had to think about it for a moment before he glanced over at Kim and then nodded his head and went up to take the paper from Scott's hand. And no sooner had he done so than other members of the crowd followed his example and took their copies. And then once they had the papers in their hands, the members of this modern posse began to drift away, heading home to equip themselves for their day in the woods.

Greywolf didn't know why Eric had acted so surprised when he'd been asked for help, since he was the first guy people had always turned to for help. He was the ultimate handyman, the guy who knew how to do everything and fix anything, on top of which he was a natural leader who people respected. So who else could Scott have turned to in a situation like that? It had to be Eric, and Eric should have been expecting it, shouldn't he?

Greywolf didn't ask Eric about it, though, as even asking might have been probing a bit too deeply into the troubled relationship that seemed to exist between Eric and Scott. And if Eric didn't want to talk about these things voluntarily then Greywolf wouldn't push the issue. So instead of discussing relationships or feelings or anything of that sort, the only things that Eric, Kim and Greywolf discussed on their way home were the practical things: the food to take, the supplies, the firearms.

When they reached the house, they quickly gathered up the materials they had discussed. And while Kim absolutely refused to carry a firearm herself, she didn't object when Eric strapped an automatic onto his hip and then handed a bolt-action hunting rifle to Greywolf. After all, Walker was a dangerous man.

As soon as their supplies were ready, they put on their small day-hike backpacks and returned to Scott's office to find that there was still a sizable crowd milling around, though Scott himself was no longer anywhere to be seen. Some of the others in the crowd were already outfitted for the pursuit and, as time went by, more and more posse members appeared. But as they waited there in the street, no one came out to organize them or give them directions. And so they continued to wait.

Finally, Eric got tired of the situation and he announced in a loud voice that he and his friends were going to start out at Walker's mine and then search the back trails between there and the ridge. And he went on to suggest that others search the main trail and other trails that he named for the crowd. As soon as his speech was over, he motioned for Kim and Greywolf to follow him, and the three of them began to march out of town as others in the crowd spoke up to announce which trails they intended to search.

The three of them followed the road that led up the valley behind town and, after going about half a mile, they came to a parking area beyond which was a chain stretched across the road and a sign announcing that no motor vehicles were allowed beyond that point. Kim pointed this out proudly to Greywolf saying that it was one of Scott's earliest and greatest accomplishments in town. Because banning cars on the trail had not only helped to drive out the miners, but it had also stopped the four-wheel-drive types from coming to town. It had been one of the keys to Scott's plan for preserving the ecology in that area.

Eric didn't say anything on the issue, and Greywolf wasn't sure if his silence had to do with his personal opinion of Scott or his opinion of Scott's campaign or what. But whatever the case, the three of them simply stepped over the chain without a pause and continued on their way along the old mining road that now served as a hiking trail.

The valley ended just beyond the barrier, and the road quickly began to climb and wind its way up the hills at the head of the valley. As the three of them climbed, they passed other small roads and trails that branched off on either side. And each time they passed a trail, Eric named it and told Greywolf where it went with many of the destinations he described being old, abandoned gold mines.

They continued along the main trail for a few miles until finally they came to the side road that led to Walker's mine. Greywolf immediately noticed that this particular road wasn't as overgrown as all the others had been and, when he pointed this out, Eric told him that up until very recently, Walker had continued to drive up to his mine in spite of the ban on cars. It seemed that he knew some way around the barrier at the foot of the trail, some way around it or some way through it. And Kim piped in that the sheriff or one of his buddies had probably given him a spare key to the lock on the chain.

They soon came to the mine, a simple hole in the side of the mountain that was actually kind of difficult to locate because of all the huge piles of rocks and garbage that covered the area. The place was a complete ecological disaster area with old abandoned vehicles and broken machinery scattered everywhere along with rusty tin cans and other types of litter that seemed to have been accumulating there for many years. And off to one side of this extensive garbage dump was a dilapidated old cabin.

They immediately checked out the cabin and found nothing inside but filth and a foul odor, sure signs that no one had used the place in a long time. So now the next step was to check out the mine itself, something that Eric said he'd do alone. He dug a flashlight out of his pack and then, pulling out his pistol and holding it in one hand while he held the flashlight in the other, he moved forward slowly and carefully until he'd disappeared from sight. It was some

time later before he re-emerged with the flashlight still in his hand but the pistol now back in its holster. And as he came out, he told the others that Walker wasn't in there.

So the next thing to do was for the three of them to search the small trails ascending the mountains behind the mine. And in doing this, they spent the rest of the afternoon walking along those trails, climbing up and down through beautiful forests that had only been lightly touched by logging, and pausing at the various overlooks that gave spectacular views of the surrounding country.

As they rested and gazed out at the mountains from these overlooks, Greywolf began for the first time to feel any real sympathy for Scott and his campaign. Because after all, this area was truly worth preserving. It was a gem, a scenic and ecological gem. So maybe Scott was right after all. Maybe he really was fighting the good fight.

They finally returned to town well after dark and then, after dropping off their equipment at home, they headed straight for the Palace to get something to eat and drink and to find out how the search had gone in other areas. And no sooner did they walk in the door than they found themselves being interrogated about their own search. Had they been able to uncover Walker's hideout? And the very fact that the big crowd in the bar even asked them this question told them immediately that no one else in town had been able to find him either. The search had been a bust.

But still they stayed around until late that evening, drinking draw beers and telling stories about the day's events and speculating about the future. They stayed around and waited for Scott who everyone expected to make an appearance. But as it turned out, he never showed up. And so finally as the night wore on, people began to drift away and go home.

The next day the town was quiet, deathly quiet after all the excitement of the day before. And it was especially quiet for Greywolf since Eric and Kim had to go to some other town where they said that Kim had a job to do, one that would keep them away until late that night.

So Greywolf hung around by himself, and he strolled around town a little, and he read a lot. And then when evening rolled around, he decided to go out and drink some beer in spite of the fact that he'd been drinking way more than his usual quota during the last couple of evenings. But when he thought about going out to a bar, he knew that he didn't want to go to the Palace. Not alone, not without Eric. Because he just didn't feel comfortable there. It wasn't his type of crowd. What he needed to do was to go find some other place in some other part of town.

In walking around the town, he had noticed a sort of rundown little bar named Jake's Place just outside the downtown core, and so he decided to make this bar his first stop of the evening. His first stop and his last stop as it would turn out, since there were very few bars in town to choose from and since this one turned out to be just his kind of place.

It was a typical small-town bar with absolutely no pretensions. It was dark and smoky, and the people there were all typical small-town western types, the types who made their livings working with their hands. The tables and the chairs were cheap and well worn while the bar itself was nothing special. Just a bar. Just a standard American bar. And in the back, there was a pool table which had obviously seen a lot of use since the felt was thin and faded.



Greywolf immediately felt at home as he sat down at the bar and ordered a draft beer—not a draw beer. He felt good as he sat and drank his beer, and he eventually decided to wander over to the pool table and put down a quarter, reserving a spot in the line of those who were waiting to play. He lost the first game he played, so he put down another quarter and waited for his turn to come up again. And the next time he won—he always played better after a couple of beers since it steadied his hand—and then he won a couple more games before losing and having to cough up another quarter and wait for his turn once again.

As he played, he talked with the other players, and he especially talked with one guy, a sloppy, unshaven guy with a big moustache and dirty clothes and a cowboy hat. The guy said his name was Jimmie and, though he looked a bit rough at first, Greywolf could tell as soon as he opened his mouth that he was good people, and so the two of them hit it right off.

They started out discussing the pool games before they moved on to other things such as the ways that each of them scraped out a living, and they even talked a little bit about their dreams. They talked freely and easily, and every time they finished their beers, they bought each other rounds—rounds of draft beers. Greywolf mentioned that he was a friend of Eric's, and Jimmie said that he knew who Eric was and that he thought he was okay in spite of what some people might say.

Greywolf was still intrigued by the subject of Walker, and he thought that if he asked Jimmie about him, he might just get a whole new perspective on the guy than he had gotten up until then. But as soon as he brought up the subject, his new friend eyed him suspiciously and said, "Why don't you go ask your friend Eric about him? He knows Walker better than I do."

"Really? Are they friends? Eric never said anything about that."

"Used-to-be friends, that's what they are. Used to be good friends."

"But not anymore?"

"Hell no, not with what's been happenin' around here. Not with the sides they been takin'."

Greywolf kept asking questions, though, and with time, he managed to extract a bit more information about Eric and Walker. He got Jimmie to tell him about how the two of them had been very close some time back, how they'd done everything together, but how at some point they'd had a big-time falling out. And Jimmie went on to tell him that as far as anyone knew, they hadn't seen or spoken to each other in the last couple of years, not since around the time when that lawyer showed up in town.

And then once Jimmie had finished telling what he knew about the broken friendship, Greywolf continued to pepper him with other questions, encouraging him to tell whatever else he could about Walker and about his struggle with the lawyer. There was a bit of resistance to this, but it wasn't long before Jimmie gave in and started answering the questions and telling Greywolf what he knew. He told stories, the same ones that Greywolf had already heard, but now when Jimmie told them, they cast Walker in a whole different light. When Jimmie told them, they cast Walker as the hero.

He was no longer the narrow-minded redneck he'd been portrayed as in the Palace; he was no longer the throwback who was trying to prevent the town from becoming a part of the modern world. Instead, he was portrayed as the champion of the little guy, of the old-time locals who were now being squeezed out by all the new arrivals. He was portrayed as the last of the cowboys, the only guy who was willing to stand up to the whole gor-tex-and-alfalfa-sprouts crowd that was ever more quickly taking over the town and converting it into some type of high-priced tourist attraction surrounded by a giant park. A park where none of the locals had any rights to use the land anymore because they had to save it for all the rich tourists who came there to hike.

Walker was portrayed as the last holdout of the Old West, the last guy still fighting the takeover by the New West, and for that reason, Jimmie and the other people who hung out in Jake's Place loved him in spite of whatever short-comings he may have had.

When Greywolf finally left that night, he felt like he had switched back over to Walker's side again, because he really had no use for the New West that Scott and his friends represented. I mean sure, the mountains were beautiful and Walker's mine was ugly, but there was something about the whole way of life that each of them represented, something that made him prefer the Old West. So maybe that meant that he was a throwback himself. Well, so what? He could accept that.

There was one thing, though, that he couldn't figure out at all, and that was Eric's position in all this. Because here was a guy who was about as Old West as you could get, but instead of being with Walker, he was hanging out at the Palace and collaborating with the other side. So the question was, why was he doing it? Was it because of Kim, or was it because he really supported them, or what?

Greywolf wanted to know, he wanted to talk to Eric one-on-one and ask him those questions. And while he was at it, maybe he should tell Eric one very recent story that Jimmie had told him. One about the previous day when Jimmie claimed that after Walker had "served" Scott, he had stayed around town afterward, hiding somewhere where he'd been able to watch the whole performance: Scott's speech and the formation of the posse and all the rest of it. And according to Jimmie, the whole time he'd been fighting as hard as he could not to laugh out loud at all the clowns and give away his hiding place.

The next day, Greywolf waited until he and Eric were alone, and then he sprang the question on him: What is Walker really like?

"He's an asshole," was Eric's reply, and he said that that was all he had to say on the subject. But Greywolf kept prying, and he finally got Eric to elaborate a bit more. Though all he would say was that Walker was just another cowboy—another cowboy asshole—and a small-time, small-town loser. Just that, an asshole and a loser. And also, Eric said that he didn't believe the story about Walker watching the formation of the posse the day before. He said that it was just the type of lie that the asshole would make up.

Greywolf had no idea where all this animosity came from, but as there was obviously nothing to be gained by pushing the issue any further, he soon let the subject drop. There was

very bad blood between Eric and Walker, that was certain, but as far as uncovering the fight or the betrayal that had first led to that bad blood, Greywolf was still completely in the dark.

Things remained quiet around town for another couple of days. Kim still left town on certain days to do her jobs, and Eric still hung out and did occasional odd jobs. But then the arrival in town of a new character opened up a whole new phase in the story of the long pursuit of Walker.

This new character was a former Forest Ranger by the name of Edward or Edwards—Greywolf was never sure exactly which one it was, and for that matter he was never even sure if it was the guy's first name or his last. But whatever his name was, he was supposed to be some sort of hotshot tracker who had been trained in tracking—and a lot of other things—by an old Indian medicine man. Or at least that was the reputation that accompanied him, and it was based upon his reputation that Scott had decided to hire him to come in and track down Walker and serve him with the restraining order once and for all.

Upon meeting him, though, Greywolf soon came to realize that this guy was a truly strange duck. Because although he didn't look all that unusual with his unkempt hair and beard and his beat-up old outdoor clothes highlighted by a few discreet Indian accents and accessories, he exhibited a behavior that was truly eccentric, maybe even bizarre. And this became apparent upon their first meeting when Greywolf went up to say hello to him and introduced himself, while Edwards remained completely impassive, not looking at him or responding to him or doing anything else to even acknowledge his existence. And then after a minute or two of this silence, when Greywolf was about to walk away, Edwards suddenly burst out with a question having to do with Walker and the type of boots he wore. That was it, no hello, no how are you, just a question. And when Greywolf said that he didn't know anything about Walker's boots, Edwards went right back to ignoring him. No thank you and no goodbye.

All that Greywolf could do after that encounter was to shake his head and mumble something to himself about the guy having spent way too much time out in the woods alone. He seemed to have completely forgotten how to interact with people, if he had ever known how to in the first place.

But Edwards wasn't in town for long, just long enough to pick up a copy of the restraining order and gather what information he could about Walker before disappearing into the forest outside of town not to be seen again for several days. And during those days whenever anyone ran into Scott, they would always ask him how the search was going only to have him reply that he didn't know any more about what was going on than anyone else did. All he knew was that Edwards was out there in the forest somewhere tracking down Walker.

And then one day, Edwards was back in town. But upon his return, he didn't go to see Scott and report his progress or anything else of that sort. In fact, he didn't say anything to anybody, not even a hello. Instead he began wandering around the outskirts of town searching for footprints and other signs. And since he said nothing as he continued his search, it wasn't clear to anyone who saw him whether he was now hot on Walker's trail or whether he was just poking around trying to find some clue to a trail that he had long since lost.

When Greywolf saw him looking around by the edge of town that day, he decided that maybe he should follow along for awhile and watch the master at work. Maybe he could learn something about tracking, and maybe he could even figure out what it was that made this guy tick. And so he followed at a discreet distance, watching as Edwards moved along slowly and methodically, examining every detail of the area between the town and the forest and sometimes squatting or even getting down onto all fours to study certain signs more carefully. He showed tremendous patience as he went, patience and single-mindedness as he let nothing at all disturb his concentration upon the task.

After a time, Greywolf was starting to get bored with the performance, and he was thinking about leaving when suddenly he noticed that Edwards' behavior had changed. He was no longer moving along slowly and carefully, but instead he stood frozen in one spot with his eyes darting about as they studied the area between a small trail leading out of the woods and the back of a particular house. And then after several minutes of this, Edwards himself began darting about between the trail and the house and especially to the area just outside a certain window.

He had dashed about for some time and thoroughly studied the area in question when he began to hurry away, evidently going off to report his findings to Scott or to get some reinforcements or something. But before he had gone very far, the window that he'd just been examining was suddenly flung open and a man leapt out of it and began running up the trail into the woods.

Walker! It had to be Walker, and Greywolf knew it as soon as he saw the blurry figure run by. Edwards immediately turned and started out in pursuit, and then Greywolf, too, joined in the chase. After all, he had to see how it was going to come out.

The three of them ran up the trail at full speed, dodging branches and bushes and hopping over the occasional trunk, with Greywolf staying just far enough behind Edwards to be able to see which way he went at each fork in the trail. They ran on in that way for half a mile, a mile, maybe further, following first one trail and then another.

But then all at once, as Greywolf was watching Edwards in front of him, the guy suddenly dropped down and disappeared from sight. Just like that, with no warning and no noise as he fell, not even a shout. Greywolf slowed down as he reached the spot where Edwards had disappeared, and he soon saw the reason for the disappearance which was the fact that this little trail that Walker had led them up was actually a false trail that ended right at the edge of a small precipice. And now looking down at the bottom of the precipice, some eight or ten feet down, he could see the figure of Edwards sprawled out in obvious but silent pain.

Greywolf called down to him to ask if he was okay and, receiving no answer, he began to look around for a way to go down and help him. But then as he was in the process of looking, he heard a voice some distance off yelling at him and cursing him and taunting Edwards about his broken leg. He looked up to see a man standing on a nearby ridge, a man who went on and on cursing and taunting in a truly foul-mouthed and vile way. He couldn't see the man too clearly because of the distance and because of the angle of the sunlight. All he could really see was a muscular, athletic looking man with long, stringy blond hair sticking out from underneath a battered old cowboy hat. But along with the good impression given off by the man's build, he

also gave off another impression that seemed apparent to Greywolf even at that distance, an impression of ugliness that was almost as bad as the language he was using.

He was telling Greywolf to get his buddy and get out of there, to get out of town and never show their faces again, and he said that he was serious about it. Of course, this was a false charge against Greywolf, so he decided to speak up and explain the situation to Walker. "Hey, man, you got me all wrong. I'm not with him. I'm just a bystander." And when Walker didn't seem to understand what he was saying, he tried to elaborate. "I just saw this guy chasing you, and I decided to see what would happen. That's all. I got nothing to do with this guy."

"Well, you get the fuck outa town anyway. Don't you never let me see your ugly motherfuckin' ass again."

"No, wait a minute. I'm tellin' you. I'm not with those guys who are tryin' to get you. I'm on your side!"

"I don't got no side, you fuckin' shit. And even if I did have one, I wouldn't want no cocksuckin' faggot like you on it."

Greywolf tried arguing a bit more, and he even mentioned that he was an old friend of Eric's, but that argument went nowhere at all. And so in the end, the only thing that he could do was to shut up and grit his teeth at the insults and wait until Walker got tired of talking and went away. And while he waited, Greywolf repeated to himself several times, "Eric was right. This guy's an asshole. A complete, flaming fuckin' asshole."

When Walker finally left, Greywolf turned to make his way down to Edwards who was already in the process of silently rigging up a splint for his broken leg. Greywolf helped him make the splint and, while he was doing so, the only time Edwards spoke to him was to make a few corrections in the way he was applying and tying it. And then once the splint was in place, Greywolf helped Edwards to his feet and supported him as the two of them hobbled their way down the trail toward town, one of them hobbling along with an injured leg, and the other with injured pride. And all the way to town, Edwards never said a single word to Greywolf, treating him the same way as he would have treated a wooden crutch.

When Scott heard about what had happened, he went ballistic. But he didn't just get angry in vain. He was too much of a lawyer for that. Instead, he got busy planning and preparing a counter-attack, a counter-attack that ended up taking him a few days to implement. Because it wasn't until some three days later that the town finally became aware of exactly what that counter-attack would be.

They were three days of peace and tranquility in which Eric and Kim and the whole town got back to their normal routines. Though there was one thing in town that had definitely changed, and that was Greywolf's attitude as, from this point on, he no longer felt himself to be among Walker's supporters. And while he still felt a certain sympathy for the old-style freedom that Walker seemed to represent, he felt no sympathy whatsoever for the man himself. Because anyone who would act like that, anyone who would talk that way to someone he didn't even know, was totally undeserving of Greywolf's support. In fact, he probably deserved everything that Scot was going to do to him.

At the end of those three days, word of the counter-attack began to spread around town, word that Scott had managed to get a criminal warrant against Walker. A warrant for the attempted murder of Edwards whom he had tried to kill by leading him off a cliff and causing a fall that Edwards had only managed to survive through some miracle. And although the charge was obviously trumped up, at least the warrant was enough to finally force Sheriff Jones to come to town and deal with the matter.

The sheriff showed up the next morning and, as soon as he went to visit Scott in his office, Scott insisted that he be made aware of the gravity of the situation by listening to the testimony of a witness to the assault. And that witness, of course, was Greywolf.

Eric accompanied him there and then waited outside while Greywolf went into the office to give his testimony. The office was very attractive with tastefully rustic furniture and with old western photos and relics adorning the walls. And Scott himself was looking very good, handsome and tanned and fit, looking almost like a movie star, an appearance that was in complete contrast to the sheriff's. Because the sheriff looked like a small-town bumpkin, a town clown in a sloppy uniform, fat and out of shape. He looked like a guy who had never met a donut he didn't like.

And then when the two of them spoke, the contrast was just as great, the contrast between the sheriff's slow drawl and Scott's educated and precise diction. The sheriff was the first to speak, asking Greywolf his name and place of residence, if any, and then he turned to Scott. "Okay Mr. Sitavic, you can go ahead and ask the questions."

"That's Cvitanovic, Mr. Cvitanovic."

"Oh, sorry, Mr. Sanavich...go ahead..."

"Cvitanovic, Cvitanovic."

"Okay, uh...Sorry. I have a little trouble with it."

Scott turned to Greywolf and began to ask him about the events of the day when Edwards had been injured, and he seemed happy enough with the answers he was getting. Or at least he was happy with them up until he reached the part about the cliff, because at this point, Greywolf refused to commit himself on the question of whether or not Walker had intentionally led them there. The only answer that Greywolf would give was a maybe. And when Scott pushed harder, all he could get Greywolf to say was that he guessed so. He guessed that Walker could have led Edwards off the cliff intentionally.

Scott wasn't a bit happy with that answer, and he tried to lead Greywolf on to make a more definitive statement. He tried to lead him and he tried to cajole him, but none of it worked. Greywolf continued to stick to his story that he didn't know what Walker's intentions were. And after this had gone on for some time, the sheriff finally broke in, "That ain't much of a witness you got there, now is he?"

Scott's blood was boiling at this point, and his reply was just as hot, "No, he may not be, but that's my problem and the prosecutor's problem when we get to trial. It's not your problem."

The sheriff was about to say something when Scott cut him off. “Your problem is that there’s a warrant out for Walker’s arrest, and it’s your job to go out there and make that arrest. That’s it! That’s your only problem is to make the arrest.”

The sheriff offered a few excuses for not arresting Walker, but as Scott quickly shot each excuse down, he finally gave in and said, “Okay, you’re right. I’ll go make the arrest.”

“Good, it’s about time.”

“So tell me, where is he? Where can I find him to make the arrest?”

“I don’t know. That’s been the problem all along. I don’t know where he is. I don’t know where he’s been hiding.”

“Well, if you don’t know, I don’t know how I’m supposed to find him.”

“It’s your job! You’re the sheriff. You’re supposed to be able to find criminals. You’ve got the resources for it. You’ve got the manpower.”

“Maybe we do got the resources, but it’s awful hard trackin’ someone down out there in them mountains. It’s hard and it’s expensive and it takes a long time.”

“But you can do it. You’ve got to do it!”

“I don’t know...”

“Listen, this isn’t a traffic ticket we’re dealing with here. This is a felony warrant, a warrant for attempted murder. This man is a dangerous criminal.”

“Yeah, but I still don’t know. It’s awful hard to justify spendin’ all that money...That’s the taxpayers’ money, ya know.”

“Yes, I do know. And I also know that it’s there to protect the taxpayers from dangerous criminals like Walker.”

And the two of them went on like this for some time. Scott kept insisting, and the sheriff kept making excuses. But then came a moment when Scott abruptly changed tactics, and he began to make threats. He said that he would make Walker’s friends tell the sheriff where he was hiding. He said that he would make them tell or he would ruin them. He said that he would sue them until they had nothing left, until he had destroyed them. And he said that he would start off with Tom Jessup, the guy in whose house Walker had been hiding. He said that he would accuse Jessup of being an accessory to the assault on Edwards and with that, he’d take away everything he owned. He’d leave Jessup out on the street, Jessup and his old mother who lived with him. He would do whatever it took to get Walker.

The sheriff sat silently through most of this barrage. He could hear by the tone of his voice just how serious Scott was. And finally, he said that he would see what he could do. He

wouldn't make any promises, mind you, but he would ask around to see what he could find out. And on that note, the meeting broke up.

When Greywolf came out of the office, Eric wanted to know everything that had been said. He wanted Greywolf to tell him the whole story. And of course, Greywolf was only too happy to oblige. After all, he wasn't the type to keep secrets from his friends. He was willing to open up and tell it all—unlike Eric.

So he told what had been said, and Eric laughed when he heard about some of the exchanges. It was like he could just picture the two of them in there. But then when Greywolf got to the part about the threats, Eric's face went dead serious and he muttered something like, "That's bad. That's very bad."

During that day, Greywolf went around repeating his story to several other friends and acquaintances. And he even told it to Jimmie when he happened to run into him late that afternoon. He told the humorous parts to Jimmie, and he told about the threats, and when he did so, he saw the same worried expression come over Jimmie's face that he'd seen come over Eric's. It was clear that he took the threats very seriously.

And as Jimmie went off to spread the tale among his friends, a realization suddenly struck Greywolf, a realization of just how badly he'd been played for a sucker by Scott. Because here he was doing Scott's bidding by spreading terror among Walker's friends and supporters, spreading it far more effectively than Scott ever could have done by himself.

And when he realized this, Greywolf also came to understand why it was that Scott had insisted upon his presence in the office. It hadn't been because he'd thought that Greywolf's testimony would do anything to help convince the sheriff. Not at all. That had had nothing to do with it. The real reason had been because Scott had wanted him to hear the threats and to spread them around town. He'd planned it all out, and Greywolf had played his part perfectly, just like the sucker that he was.

Greywolf felt terrible about what he'd done, and he immediately stopped spreading his story, but by now, it was already way too late. The story was all over town, and so was the terror.

And that was the way that things stood for the next couple of days, with life going on the same as always and with the town outwardly quiet, but with the terror slowly spreading among Walker's friends. And then suddenly one morning, the word shot around town like wildfire that the sheriff was here and that he had a group of deputies with him. Someone must have talked, because they were on their way to arrest Walker.

And no sooner had word reached them of the sheriff's arrival than Eric turned to Greywolf and said, "Come on quick. We've gotta go someplace." Hearing the urgency in his voice, Greywolf did as he was told, and he soon found himself jogging up a trail a short distance behind Eric, jogging into the mountains outside of town.

"Where we...goin'?" Greywolf puffed out after they'd gone some distance from town.



“Gotta warn...Walker,” Eric called back without turning around. Warn Walker? What was he talking about? Why would he want to do that? And how could he? How could he know where to find Walker out there?

And then all at once, it began to become clear. Eric knew exactly where Walker was hiding, and he’d known it all along. He’d known where he was back on the day of the posse when he’d deliberately led everyone away from him. And his whole search of the mine had been nothing but an act, an act for Greywolf’s sake and especially for Kim’s sake.

And then almost as though he was reading Greywolf’s mind, Eric called out between breaths, “Don’t tell...Kim...about this...She can’t...know.” And Greywolf yelled back, “Okay,” as he continued to jog along behind.

They ran along through an area that Greywolf hadn’t seen before—an area that Eric must have been intentionally avoiding—following a series of narrow footpaths. And even when they were forced by failing strength to slow down to a walk, they still knew that they had a comfortable lead on the sheriff. Because as fat and out of shape as he was, it would take him a long, long time to walk all the way up here.

Finally, Eric announced that they were getting close to the cave, and he began to call out ahead of them, “Hey, Walk. It’s me. I gotta talk to you.” He yelled it several times as the two of them continued ascending the trail to the cave, and he only stopped when Walker appeared on a ridge a short distance ahead of them, standing there aggressively and cradling a rifle.

“That’s far enough, Mac,” he said, calling Eric by a nickname that made reference to his last name. “Whatta you want? And who the hell is that with you?”

“It’s okay, he’s cool. He’s an old friend. I’ve known him for a lotta years.” This seemed to appease Walker somewhat, and he let the rifle droop into a more relaxed position. Greywolf was getting a much better look at him now than he had on their previous encounter, and he could see that from this angle and in this light, Walker really wasn’t ugly at all. Not like he’d seemed on that first occasion. He was unattractive, yes, but there was also something attractive about him, something about his bearing or his attitude that almost gave him an air of nobility.

While Greywolf was taking the opportunity to look Walker over, Eric got right down to the reason for their visit. “The sheriff is on his way up here. The sheriff and a whole group of his deputies. Someone musta told em where you are. Someone musta talked.”

‘Yeah, like you or somethin’.’

“No man, not me. You know I’d never do that.”

And Walker admitted as much with a half-mumbled, “Yeah, yeah.”

Eric went on to tell him that he didn’t have long, that the sheriff and his men had probably started up the trail not far behind the two of them, and that this was Walker’s last chance to clear out before they arrived. Before he was busted.

“Clear out where?” Walker asked.

“Anywhere. Anywhere at all. Just clear out for awhile and lay low. Like go to Denver or something. And then you can come back later on, when the heat’s off.”

“When the heat’s off? It ain’t never gonna be off. That guy ain’t never gonna let up. And if I go, it’s all over. I’m finished. I’m gone and he wins.”

“Whatta you mean? Nobody wins...And besides, it’s not all about winnin’ and losin’ anyway. It’s not! It’s about survivin’. It’s about livin’ to fight another day.”

“No it ain’t. It’s about winnin’!” And he gave a dramatic pause. “Cause that’s all there is is winnin’.”

They continued back and forth like this for some time with neither of them convincing the other of anything. And then at one point, Walker launched into a deeper analysis of the situation. “Ya know, Mac, the situation now is just like it was back when our people first come out here to the west a long time ago. Cause they got out here and they liked it and they thought that, ya know this west would be a really great place if only it wasn’t for all them damn Indians around here. And then ya know they went out and they got rid of the Indians. Well, now these new people comin out here are just like that. They say the west is a great place and all that, but they just don’t like all them damn westerners out here. And so now ya know they wanta get rid of us the same way our people got rid of the Indians. They wanta clean the westerners outa the west.”

Eric hardly knew how to answer this, which may have been true or may have been exaggerated, but he kept trying to convince Walker to change his mind. He said that the west was changing, that the world was changing, and that what you had to do was to adapt. But Walker wouldn’t hear of it. He said that he’d rather die than adapt to the world that Scott and his people were creating. Eric agreed with him that the new world sucked, but what could you do? It was the only world there was. You had to adapt to it.

“No,” said Walker, “you don’t gotta adapt. You can fight it. You can fight it to the death. Cause you always got that choice. Liberty or death!”

“Yeah, you got that choice, but you don’t have to make it. Not really.”

“Yes, you do. Liberty or death!”

“No, man, there’s other ways...”

“Liberty or death. That’s it!”

“No, you just... No man! Don’t do it,” Eric pleaded. “Don’t choose death, that’s all. Just don’t choose death.”

When they heard the sheriff and his men approaching from off in the distance, Eric and Greywolf went to hide, climbing up a hill behind them and picking a spot where they’d be able

to see what would happen. And shortly after they'd reached their hiding place, they saw the sheriff and three deputies advance to the spot where the two of them had just stood. They were accompanied by another guy who—as Eric whispered to Greywolf—was a good friend of Jessup's.

Walker stood his ground on the ridge, and he called out to the sheriff to stop just like he'd done with Eric and Greywolf. The sheriff did as he was told and, from where he stood, he spoke out to Walker. "Hello, Billy. How are you?"

"Nobody calls me that no more, sheriff."

The sheriff apologized and called him Bill, and then after another failed attempt at starting a casual conversation, he said, "I guess you know why we're here."

"I sure as shit do."

"Well, I gotta take you in. It's my job. But one thing I can tell ya right now is that that charge against you ain't got a snowball's chance in hell."

"I ain't goin', sheriff."

"Ah now, come on. That's no way to talk...Now we both know that guy'll never convict ya. There's no way. And I'm just makin' this arrest cause I gotta. That's all."

"Well, I still ain't goin', and I already told ya that."

"Now, don't be like that, Billy...I mean Bill. You're not in any real trouble now if you just come with me. So come on. Let's make it easy before you go and cause yourself some real problems."

"No, you're wrong there, sheriff. It ain't stayin' here that's gonna get me into trouble. It's goin' in with you. Cause then that asshole can get his hooks into me with his lawsuits and his restraining orders and all that shit. So I ain't goin'. I'm stayin' here."

The sheriff couldn't accept that argument, and as Walker also refused to listen to his line of reasoning, the two of them just went around and around. The sheriff talked to him about what his family would think and what they would do in his situation, and he talked to him about the old days, but nothing could shake Walker's determination to resist the arrest. As time went by, one of the deputies went up and said something to the sheriff who seemed to wave him off with his hand. And then after that, the deputy went over to another deputy, and the two of them headed off into the woods to their left.

"Where those guys goin'?" asked Walker with alarm in his voice as he raised his rifle back up to the ready position.

"Now take it easy, Bill. They're not goin' anywhere."

"Yes, they are. They're tryin' to surround me."

“Just calm down. They’re not doin’ anything. They’re just tired of standin’ here. They wanta look around.”

“Well, you tell em to stop!” Walker threatened them with his gun, but he didn’t aim or fire. And he held his ground, refusing to run away while there was still time. He seemed determined to stay and see this thing through, though it was obvious to those watching that he was starting to panic. He had the look of an animal that sees the trap springing shut.

The deputies continued on their way, one of them taking up an advantageous position where he’d be able to get a clear shot at Walker if need be, while the other continued to circle around, evidently trying to cut off any retreat. And the whole time, the sheriff kept talking to him calmly and soothingly, only interrupting himself once to yell at the deputies not to do anything to provoke Walker. He was trying to keep him from getting so upset. But it wasn’t working. Because while Walker continued to stand there in his noble posture, refusing to run and refusing to give in, his speech was rapidly losing its coherence. He answered the sheriff’s reassurances with a series of threats and insults that kept growing worse and worse until finally all he was doing was screaming out a series of ultimatums. “I swear I’ll start shootin’!...I’ll kill ya all!...Get outa here now!”

As Walker’s agitation increased, Greywolf could hear Eric next to him muttering, “Don’t do it. Don’t do it,” over and over again like a mantra. And the more agitated that Walker became, the more loudly Eric chanted it. And then all at once, Eric was yelling it out at the top of his lungs, “Don’t do it!” just as Walker raised his rifle and fired a shot over the sheriff’s head.

The sheriff had just started to yell to his deputies to hold their fire when a second shot went over his head and, almost simultaneously, a shot from the deputy off to the left sent Walker’s brains splattering out of the side of his head.

Eric was on his feet and charging halfway down the hill toward the sheriff, yelling and cursing and insulting in a complete rage, cursing the sheriff and the deputies and cursing Walker and cursing the whole town and the country and the universe. And then after several minutes of this, he suddenly went silent, never to speak of Walker again.

He moped around the house all afternoon until Kim came home early in the evening saying that they should all go down to the Palace, an idea which he immediately rejected. And no sooner had he said no than he walked off and closed himself up in the bedroom for the rest of the night.

Kim explained to Greywolf that Scott was inviting everyone to the Palace for what he called a memorial for Walker—Walker who had just died so tragically. And though Kim didn’t seem to see the hypocrisy or to realize that it would really be a victory celebration, Greywolf saw it all too clearly and knew that he couldn’t share in that celebration any more than Eric could. And so Kim ended up having to go by herself.

She returned a few hours later, a bit tipsy and quite talkative, and she had a great desire to talk things over with Greywolf. Because first of all, she couldn’t understand what had gotten into Eric lately. Why had he been acting so strangely these days? But Greywolf couldn’t answer that question for her, because by now he knew way too much about Eric’s secrets, and he knew that

he couldn't reveal them to her. And so all he could do was to feed her platitudes and reassurances. He liked Kim and he wanted to help her, but there was just nothing he could do, nothing he could tell her without betraying Eric.

Then after a time, when she saw that the subject of Eric's behavior had reached a dead-end, she moved on to a second subject that she wanted to talk about, a second subject that was bothering her, too. And that subject was the way that the whole Walker affair had ended. She felt a powerful need to justify it all, to rationalize and to point the blame. And so for that reason, she brought out a couple of her ideas—or maybe a couple of the ideas that she'd heard down at the Palace—and she tried them out on Greywolf. She started off with the old he-brought-it-all-on-himself routine, and when that idea didn't go over very well, she tried another one: she tried blaming the whole tragedy on an over-reaction by that trigger-happy, hick Sheriff. But Greywolf rejected this second idea, too, and he countered by floating out his own idea on the matter. He suggested that maybe Scott's over-enthusiastic campaign had been more to blame than anything else. When Kim heard this, though, her reaction was to dismiss it as a sign of ignorance, as an opinion coming from someone who hadn't spent nearly enough time in town to have any idea of what things were really all about. How could anyone say something so ridiculous?

The next day, Greywolf announced that it would be his last day in town. He'd had enough of this place and it was time for him to move on. Eric was largely uncommunicative all day, and he spent hours that morning disassembling and cleaning his guns over and over again. Then in the afternoon, he suggested that he and Greywolf should go take some target practice out in the woods. And after shooting off all the ammo they took with them, they returned to the house for more gun-cleaning.

Finally that night, the two of them went down to the Palace for a final blowout. And a true blowout it proved to be, a blowout even bigger than the old ones that they used to have years ago. Eric was drinking shots with beer chasers, and it wasn't long before he was howling drunk. Drunk and mean and nasty, something that Greywolf had never seen before. He became very aggressive and began shoving people around and threatening them. He was so mean and so aggressive that he soon cleared the place out, completely terrorizing his friends who normally hung out there, and he just kept getting worse and worse as time went on. He yelled at the bartender and smashed glasses in a drunken rage, a rage that seemed to have no limits. And it wasn't until after he'd punched out Greywolf during an attempt to convince him to leave that his rage finally deflated. And then it deflated all at once, like a popped balloon as, upon seeing what he'd just done, he rapidly broke down and turned into a weepy drunk who apologized over and over again for hitting his best friend. The only real friend he ever had.

Eric was back to normal again the next morning when Greywolf left, he was back to his old self and his old life—his life of adapting and surviving. But as far as Greywolf himself was concerned, he swore that he'd never return to this town again. And although that would mean losing touch with Eric, so be it. It was the price he'd have to pay.

But then again, maybe Eric might leave someday. Maybe he might come to realize that it really is a big country after all, and that there are lots of different places where you can live. And maybe someday he might even find a place where the New West is a whole lot easier to adapt to than it is in this town. Maybe he might just find that perfect town.

Because after all, the grass may not be greener over the next hill, but there are an awful lot of hills around here. So it's bound to be greener over one of them.